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The Helpless Hand; or, Backwoods Retribution.

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Author of "The Wild-Horse Hunters," "Blue Dick," "The Land Pirates," Etc., Etc.



"HOW MUCH LONGER CAN YOU STAND IT, CHOC?" ASKED BILL BUCK, WITH A SIGNIFICANT INTONATION OF VOICE; "MOST DONE, AIN'T YE?"

The Helpless Hand.

A TALE OF BACKWOODS RETRIBUTION.

BY CAPTAIN MAYNE REID.

CHAPTER I.

A BIVOUAC OF BOY HUNTERS.

A HUNTERS' bivouac under the shadows of a Mississippian forest, in a spot where the trees stand unthinned by the ax of the woodman. It is upon the Arkansas side of the great river, not far from the town of Helena, and in the direction of Little Rock, the capital of the State.

The scene is a small glade, surrounded by tall cottonwood trees, one of which on each side, conspicuously "blazed," indicates a "trace" of travel. This is that leading from Helena to a settlement on the forks of the White river and Cache.

The time is a quarter of a century ago, when this district of country contained a heterogeneous population, comprising some of the wildest and wickedest spirits to be found in all the length and breadth of the backwoods border. It was then the chosen home for men of fallen fortunes, lawyers and land-speculators, slave-traders and swindlers, hunters who lived by the pursuit of game, and "sportsmen" whose game was cards and whose quarry consisted of such dissolute cotton-planters as, forsaking their homes in Mississippi and Tennessee, had established themselves in the fertile bottoms of the St. Francis, the White, and the Arkansas.

A glance at the individuals composing the bivouac in question, forbids the supposition that they belonged to any of the above. There are six of them, all mere boys, the oldest not over twenty, while the youngest may be under sixteen. And though at the same glance you are satisfied that they are but amateur hunters, the game they have succeeded in bringing down shows them gifted not only with skill but courage in the chase. The carcass of a large bear lies beside them on the sward, his skin hanging from a tree, while several steaks cut from his fat rump and impaled upon sapling spits, sing pleasantly over the camp-fire, sending a savory odor far into the forest around.

About a dozen large bear-hounds, several showing scars of recent conflict, lie panting upon the grass, while just half this number of saddle-horses stand "hitched" to the trees.

The young hunters are in high glee. They have made a creditable day's work of it; and as most of them have to go a good way before reaching home, they have halted in the glade to refresh themselves, their hounds, and their horses.

The chase has provided them with meat of which all are fond, most of them carry a "pone" of corn in their saddle-bags, and not a few a flask of corn-whisky. They would not be the youth of Arkansas if found unprovided with tobacco. Thus furnished with all the requisites of a backwoods bivouac, they are making it in gleesome style.

Scanning these young fellows from a social point of view, you see they are not all of equal rank. A difference in dress and equipments bespeaks a distinct standing, even in backwoods society, and this inequality is evident among the six individuals seated around the camp-fire. He whom we have taken for the oldest, and whose name is Brandon, is the son of a cotton-planter of some position in the neighborhood.

And there is wealth, too, as indicated by the coat of fine white linen, the costly Panama hat, and the diamond pin sparkling among the ruffles in his shirt-bosom. It is not this, however, that gives him a tone of authority among his hunting companions, but rather an assumption of superior age, combined with perhaps, superior strength, and certainly a dash of *bullyism* that exhibits itself, and somewhat offensively, in both word and action. Most of the dogs are his, as also the fine sorrel horse that stands pausing the ground not far from the fire.

Next to Master Brandon in degree of social standing is a youth who is also two years his junior, by name Randall. He is the son of a certain lawyer, late promoted to be judge of the district—an office that cannot be called a sinecure, supposing its duties to be faithfully performed.

After Randall may be ranked young Spencer, the hopeful scion of an Episcopal clergyman, whose cure lies in one of the river-side towns, several miles from the scene of the bivouac.

Of lower grade is Ned Slaughter, son of the Helena hotel-keeper, and Jeff Grubbs, the heir-apparent to Jeff Grubbs, senior, the principal dry goods merchant of the same respectable city.

At the bottom of the scale may be placed Bill Buck, whose father, half horse-trader, half corn-planter, squats on a tract of poor land near the Cache, of which no one cares to dispute his proprietorship.

Notwithstanding these social distinctions, there is none apparent around the camp-fire. In a hunters' bivouac, especially in the south-western States, still more notably within the limits of Arkansas, superiority does not belong either to fine clothes or far-stretching lineage. The scion of the "poor white trash" is as proud of his position as the descendant of the aristocratic corn-planter; and over the camp-fire in question Bill Buck talked as loudly, ate as choice steaks, and drank as much corn whisky, as Alf Brandon, the owner of the hounds and the splendid sorrel horse.

In their smoking there might be noted a difference, Bill indulging in a corn-cob pipe, while the son of the planter puffs his "principe," that has come through the custom-house from Havana.

Luncheon over, it still seems too early to separate for return home, and too late to set the dogs on a fresh bear-trail. The corn-juice inspires to some kind of diversion, suggesting trials of strength or skill. Among these sons of Arkansas cards would have come in; but, to their chagrin, no one is provided with a pack. Bill Buck regrets this, and also Alf Brandon, and so, too, the son of the Episcopal preacher. They are too far from any settlement to send for such things. Pitch and toss is not sufficiently scientific; "hokey in the hole" is too childish—and it ends in a trial of strength and activity. There is wrestling, jumping over a string, and the leap horizontal. In all of these Alf Brandon proves superior, though closely tackled by the son of the squatter. Their superiority is entirely owing to age, for these two are the oldest of the party.

The ordinary sports exhausted, something else is sought for. A new kind of gymnastic suggests itself, or is suggested by the stout branch of a cottonwood, stretching horizontally into the glade. It is nearly nine feet from the ground. Who can spring up, seize hold of it, and hang on longest?

Alf Brandon pulls out his gold repeater, furnished with a moment hand, and the trial is attempted.

All six succeed in reaching the limb, and catching it. All can hang for a time; but in this Bill Buck beats his companions, Brandon showing chagrin.

Who can hang longest with one hand?

The trial is made, and the planter's son is triumphant.

"Bah!" cries the defeated Buck. "Who can hang longest by the neck? Dare any of you try that?"

A yell of laughter responds to this *jeu d'esprit* of the young jean-clad squatter.

CHAPTER II.

TWO TRAVELERS.

The silence succeeding is so profound that the slightest sound can be heard to a considerable distance. Though not professional hunters, these young Nimrods of the backwoods are accustomed to keep open ears. It is a rustling among the reeds that now hinders them from resuming conversation—the canes that hang over the trace of travel. There are footsteps upon it, coming from the direction of Helena. They are soft as the fall of moccasined, or female, foot. For all this, they are heard distinctly on the glade—hunters, horses and hounds having pricked up their ears to listen.

Who comes from Helena?

The question has scarce shaped itself when the answer also assumes shape. There are two upon the trail—the foremost a youth of about eighteen, the other a girl full two years younger.

They are not like enough to be brother and sister. They may be of the same mother, but not father. If their father be the same, they must have come from two mothers.

Both are of interesting personal appearance—strikingly so. The youth is tall, tersely and elegantly formed, with features cast in a mold that reminds one of the Romagna; the same facile outline, the prominent nose and chin, the eagle eye that in childhood has glanced across the Teverone or the Tiber. And a complexion equally suggestive of Italian origin—a tinge of olive in the skin, slightly damasked upon the cheeks, with, above all, a thick *chevelure*, black as the plumage of a buzzard. While different in mien, this youth is dressed altogether unlike any of the young hunters who regard him from the glade. He is in true hunter costume, slightly partaking of the garb more especially affected by the Indian. His feet are in moccasins, his limbs incased in leggings of green baize cloth; a calico hunting-shirt covers his shoulders, while instead of cap or hat he wears the "toque," or turban, long since adopted by the semi-civilized tribes of the frontier. He is equipped with powder-horn and bullet-pouch, slung crossways under his arm; armed with a long pea-rifle resting negligently over his left shoulder.

His companion has been spoken of as a girl. The designation stands good; but to describe her will require less minuteness of detail. Sixteen in countenance; older to judge by the budding promise of her beauty; clad in a gown of common homespun, copperas dyed, ill-stitched and loosely adjusted; a skin soft as velvet, and ruddy as health can make it; hair to all appearance unacquainted with combs; yet spreading as the sun through a southern window; eyes like stars clipped from the blue canopy of the sky—such was she who followed, or rather accompanied, the youth in the calico hunting-shirt.

A sudden fire flashed into the eyes of Alf Brandon. It is the expression of a spirit not friendly to one of the new-comers—which may be easily guessed; for the girl is too young and too fair to have excited hostility in the breast of any one. It is her companion against whom the son of the planter feels some secret resentment.

He shows it more conspicuously on a remark made by Bill Buck.

"That skunk's always sneakin' about with old Rook's gal. Wonder her dad don't show more sense, than let her keep company wi' a nigger. She ain't a goslin' any more—she ain't."

Buck's observation displayed an animus ill-concealed. He, too, has not failed to note the budding beauty of the forest-maiden, who is the daughter of an old hunter of rude habits living in a cabin close by.

But the sentiments of the horse-dealer's son, less refined, are also less keenly felt. His remark adds fuel to the fire already kindled in the breast of Brandon.

"The nigger thinks entirely too much of himself. I propose, boys, we take the shine out of him."

It is Brandon who makes the malicious challenge. "Do the nigger good," chimes in Slaughter, of tavern training.

"But, is he a negro?" asks Spencer, to whom the strange youth has been hitherto unknown. "I should have taken him for a white."

"Three-quarters white—the rest Indian. His mother was a half-breed Choctaw. I've often seen the lot at our store."

It is Grubbs who gives this information.

"Injun or nigger—what's the difference?" proceeds the brutal Buck. "He's got starch enough for either; and, as you say, Alf Brandon, let's take it out of him. All agreed, boys?"

"All—all!"

"What do you say, Judge Randall? You've not spoken yet; and as you're a judge, we wait for your decision."

"Oh, if there's fun to be had, I'm with you. What do you propose doing to him?"

"Leave that to me," says Brandon, turning to the quarter-bred, who at that moment had arrived opposite the camp-fire. "Hilloa, Choc., what's the hurry? We've been having a trial of strength here—who can hang longest by one arm to this branch. Suppose you put it in too and see what you can do."

"I don't desire it; besides, I have no time to spare for sport."

The young hunter halted for only a moment, and is about to move on. The companionship there offered is evidently uncongenial. He suspects that some mischief is meant. He can read it in the eyes of all six—in their faces flushed with corn-whisky. Their tone, too, is insulting.

"You're afraid you'll get beat," sneeringly rejoined Brandon. "Though you have Indian blood in you, there ought to be enough white to keep you from showing coward."

"Coward! I'll thank you not to repeat that, Mr. Alfred Brandon."

"Well, then, show yourself a man, and make the trial. I've heard that you boast of having strong arms. I'll bet that I can hang longer to that branch than you—that any of us can."

"What will you bet?" asks the young hunter, stirred perhaps by the hope of employing his strength to profitable purpose.

"My rifle against yours. Looking at the value of the guns, that is quite two to one."

"Three to one," says the son of the storekeeper.

"I don't admit it," rejoins the hunter. "I prefer my piece to yours, with all its silvering upon it. But I accept your challenge, and will take your bet as you have proposed it."

"Enough! now, boys, stand by and see fair play. You, Slaughter, you keep time. Here's my watch."

The girl is going away. Brandon evidently wishes she should do so. He has some design—some malice *presuppose*—of which he does not desire her to be a witness. Whatever it is, he has communicated it to his fellows—all of whom show a like willingness for Lena Rook—such is her name—to take her departure.

Their free glances and free speech produce the desired effect. Her father's shanty is not far off. She knows the road without any guidance, and moves off along it—not, however, without casting a look toward her late traveling companion, in which might be detected a slight shadow of apprehension.

She has not failed to notice the bearing of the boy hunters, their insulting tone and attitude toward him of Indian *taint*, who, for all that, has been the companion of her girlhood's life—the sharer of her father's roof—rude and humble as it is.

Most of those left in the glade she knows—all of them by name—Bucks and Brandon with a feeling akin to fear.

But she has confidence in Pierre—the only name by which she knows her father's guest—the name given by the man who, some six years before, intrusted him to her father's keeping. She knows that he is neither child nor simpleton; and against any ordinary danger can well guard himself.

By this sweet reflection allaying her fears, she flits forward along the forest-path, like a young fawn emboldened by the knowledge that the lair of the protecting stag is safe and near.

CHAPTER III.

HANGING BY ONE HAND.

"How is it to be?" asks Slaughter, holding the watch as if he were weighing it. "By one hand or both?"

"One hand, of course. That was the challenge."

"I propose that the other be tied. That will be the best way, and fair for both parties. There will then be no balancing, and will be a simple test of strength in the arm used for suspension—the right, of course. Let the left be tied down. What say you boys?"

"There can be no objection to that. It's equal for both," remarked Randall.

"I make no objection," says Brandon.

"Nor I," assents the young hunter. "Tie as you please, so long as you tie alike."

"Good!" ejaculates Bill Buck, with a sly look to his companions, unseen by the last speaker.

The competitors stand under the branch of the tree, ready to be tied. A minute or two suffices for this. It is done by a piece of strong cord looped upon the left wrist, and then carried around the thigh. By this means the left arm is secured against struggling, or in any way lessening the strain upon the right.

Thus pinioned, both stand ready for the trial.

"Who goes first?" is the question asked by Slaughter. "The challenger or the challenged?"

"The challenged has the choice," answers Randall. "Do you wish it, Choc.," he adds, addressing himself to the quarter-bred Indian.

"It makes no difference to me, whether first or last," is the simple reply.

"All right, then; I'll go first," says Brandon, springing up and catching hold of the limb.

Slaughter, intrusted with this duty, appears to take note of the time.

One—two—three—three minutes and thirty seconds—told off on the dial of his watch—and Brandon drops to the ground.

He does not appear to have made much of an effort. It is strange he should be so indifferent to the losing of a splendid rifle, to say nothing of the humiliation of defeat.

Both seem in store for him, as the young hunter, bracing himself to the effort, springs up to the branch.

One—two—three—four—five. Five minutes are told off, and still does he remain suspended.

"How much longer can you stand it, Choc?" asks Bill Buck, with a significant intonation of voice; "most done, ain't ye?"

"Done!" scornfully exclaims the suspended hunter. "I could stand it three times as long, if needed. I suppose you're satisfied I've won?"

"A hundred dollars against my own rifle you don't hang five minutes more."

This came from Brandon.

"I take the bet," is the rejoinder.

"Since you're so confident, then, you'll have to win it or be hanged."

"What do you mean by that? What are you doing behind me?" asks the young hunter.

These questions are put under a suspicion that some trick is being played. He hears whispering behind him, and a rustling of leaves overhead.

"Only taking the precaution that you don't hurt yourself by a fall," is the answer given to the last.

It is followed by a peal of loud laughter, in which all six take part.

The young gymnast, still clinging to the branch, wonders what is making them so merry. Their speeches have suggested something sinister; and glancing upward he discovers the trick played upon him. There is a rope around his neck, with a running noose—its other end attached to a branch above. It has been adjusted in such a manner that were he to let go his hold, the noose would close around his throat, with his feet still dangling in the air.

"Hang on!" cried Slaughter, in a mocking tone. "Hang on, I advise you. If you let go you'll find your neck in a noose."

"You keep the time, Slaughter," directs Brandon. "Five minutes more. If he drops within that time let him do so. We'll then see how long the nigger can hang by his neck."

Another loud laugh rings through the glade, echoed by all except him who is the subject of it.

The young hunter is furious—almost to frenzy. His cheeks have turned ashy pale—his lips, too. Fire flashes in his coal-black eyes. Could he but descend safely from the tree, at least one of his torturers would have reason to repeat the trick they have put upon him.

He does not let go his hold. He sees the set snare, and knows the danger of falling into it. He can only await till they may please to release him from his perilous position.

But if patient, he is not silent.

"Cowards!" he cries, "cowards, every one of you; and I'll make every one of you answer for it; you'll see if I don't."

"Come, come, nigger!" retorts Brandon. "Don't talk that way or we won't let you down at all. As good as you have been hanged in these woods for too much talking. Ain't he a nice-looking gallows-bird just now? Say, boys! suppose we call back the girl, and let her have a look at him. Perhaps she'd help him out of his fix. Ha! ha! ha!"

"You'll repent those speeches, Alfred Brandon," gasps the young man, beginning to feel his strength failing him.

"You be hanged—yes, hanged! ha! ha! ha!"

Simultaneous with the laugh, a bear-hound, straying by the edge of the glade, gave out a short, sharp growl, which is instantly taken up by those lying around the campfire. At the same instant is heard a snort, perfectly intelligible to the ears of the amateur hunters.

"A bear! a bear!" is the cry uttered by all, as the animal itself is seen dashing back into the cane-brake out of which it had come to reconnoiter.

In an instant the hounds are after it, some of them already hanging to its hams; while the six hunters suddenly rush to their guns, and flinging themselves into their saddles, oblivious of all else, spur excitedly after.

In less than twenty seconds from the first howl of the hound, there is not a soul in the glade, save that in real danger of parting from the body that contains it!

The young hunter is left hanging—alone!

CHAPTER IV.

A FORCED FELO-DE-SE.

Yes, the young hunter is left hanging alone—hanging by hand and arm—soon to be suspended by the neck!

Good God! is there no alternative? No hope of his being rescued from his perilous situation?

He sees none for himself. He feels that he is powerless. His left hand is fastened to his thigh, with a cord that can not be stretched or broken. The effort is idle, and ends only in the laceration of his skin.

With the right hand he can do nothing. He dare not remove it from the limb. He dare not even change his hold. To unclasp it would be certain strangulation.

Can he not throw up his feet, and by these elevate himself upon the branch? The idea at once suggests itself, and he at once attempts its execution. He tries once, twice, thrice—until he proves it impossible. With both arms it would have been easy, or with one at an earlier period. But the strain has been too long continued, and he sees that the effort is only bringing him nearer to his end. He desists, and once more hangs vertically from the limb.

Is there no hope from hearing? He listens. There is no lack of sounds. There is the baying of the dogs at intervals, culminating in grand chorus, or breaking into short, sharp barks as the bear gives battle; there is the bellowing of brum himself, mingled with the crackling of cane as he makes his way through the thick-set culms; and above all, the shouts and wild yelling of his human pursuers.

"Are they human?" asks he whom they have left behind. "Can it be that they have abandoned me to this cruel death?"

"It can—they have," is the agonized answer, as the sounds of the chase come fainter from the forest. "They have—they have," he repeats, and then, as the tide of vengeance surges up in his heart, he cries, through clenched teeth: "Oh, God! give me escape—if but to avenge myself on these villains who have outraged your own image. Oh, God! look down in mercy! Send some one to deliver me!"

Some one to deliver him! He has no hope that any of his late tormentors will return to do it. He had but little from the first. He knows them all except Spencer, the son of the clergyman; and from the late behavior of this youth, he has seen that he is like the rest. All six are of the same stamp and character—the most dissolute scamps in the country. No hope now; for the bear-hunt has borne them far away, and even their yellings are no longer heard by him.

Hitherto he has remained silent. It seemed idle to do otherwise. Who was there to hear him, save those who would not have heeded? And his shouts would scarce have been heard among the howlings of hounds, the trampling of horses, and the shrill screeching of six fiends in human form.

Now that silence is around him—deep, solemn silence—a new hope springs up within his breast. Some one might be near, straying through the forest or traveling along the trace. He knows there is a trace. Better he had never trodden it! But another might be on it—some one with a human heart. Oh, if it were only Lena!

"Hilloo!" he cries, again and again. "Help! help! For the love of God, give help!"

His words are repeated, every one of them, and with distinctness. But, alas, not in answer—only in echo. The giant trunks are but taunting him. A fiend seems to mock him far off in the forest.

He shouts till he is hoarse—till despair causes him to desist. Once more he hangs silent.

A wonder he has hung so long. There are few boys, and perhaps fewer men, who could for such a time have sustained the terrible strain; under which even the professional gymnast might have sunk. It is explained by his training, and partly by the Indian blood coursing through his veins. A true child of the forest—a hunter from his earliest boyhood, to scale the tall tree, and hang lightly from its limbs was part of his education. To such as he the hand has a grasp prehensile as the tail of an American monkey, the arm a tension not known to the sons of civilization.

Fortunate for him it is thus, or perhaps the opposite; since it has only added to his misery, by delaying the fate that seems certainly in store for him.

He makes this reflection as he utters his last cry, and once more suffers himself to droop despairingly. So strongly does it shape itself, that he thinks of letting go his hold and at once and forever putting an end to his agony.

Death is a terrible alternative. There are few who do not fear to look it in the face—few who will hasten to meet it, so long as the slightest spark of hope glimmers in the distance. Men have been known to spring into the sea, to be swallowed by the tumultuous waves; but it was only when the ship was on fire, or certainly sinking beneath them. This is but fleeing from death to death, when all hope of life is extinguished. Perhaps it is only madness.

But Pierre Robideau—for such is the name of the young hunter—is not mad, and not ready to rush to the last desperate alternative.

It is not hope that induces him to hold on; it is only the dread hour of death.

His arm is stretched almost to dislocation of its joints; the sinews drawn tight as a bowstring; and still his fingers clutch firmly to the branch, lapped like iron around it.

His cheeks are colorless; his jaws have dropped till the lips are agape, displaying his white teeth; his eyes protrude as if about to start from their sockets.

And yet out of these wild eyes one more glance is given to the glade—one more sweep among the trunks standing around it.

What was seen in that last glaring look? Was it the form of a fair girl dimly outlined under the shadow of the trees? Or was it only that same form conjured up by a fancy flickering on the edge of eternity?

No matter now. It is too late. Even if Lena were there, she would not be in time to save him. Nature—tormented to the last thro—can hold out no longer. She relaxes the grasp of Pierre Robideau's hand; and the next moment he is seen hanging under the branch, with the tightened noose around his neck, and his tongue protruding between lips livid with the dark mantlings of death!

CHAPTER V.

TWO OLD CHUMS.

"Bound for California, air ye?"

"Yes; that's the country for me."

"Ef what you say's true, it oughter be the country for more'n you. Air ye sure 'bout it?"

"Seeing's believin'. Look at this."

The man who gave utterance to the old saw pulled from his pocket a small packet done up in fawn-skin, and untying the string, exhibited some nodules of a yellowish color.

"True; seein' air believin', they do say, an' feelin' air second natur'. Le's lay my claws on't."

The packet was placed in his hands.

"Dog-goned ef it don't look gold! An' feel like it too; an' durn me ef it don't taste like it!"

This, after he had put one of the nodules in his mouth, and rolled it over his tongue, as if tasting it.

"It is gold," was the positive rejoinder.

"An' ye tell me, Dick Tarleton, they find these sort o' nuts in Californy, lyin' right on the surfiss o' the groun'?"

"Almost the same. They dig them out of the bed of a river, and then wash the mud off them. The thing's been just found out by a man named Sutter, while they were clearing out a mill-race. The fellow I got these from's come direct from there with his bullet-pouch chock full of them, besides some pounds' weight of dust in a canvas-bag. He was in New Orleans to get it changed into dollars; an' he did it, too—five thousand in all, picked up, he says, in a spell of three months' working. He's going right back."

"Durn me ef I oughtn't to go, too. Huntin' ain't much of a bizness hyar any longer. B'r's gittin' pesky sca'ce; an' deer's most run off altogether. Besides, these young planters and the fellers from the towns, air allers about wi' thar blasted boun's, scarin' everything out o' creashun. Thar's a ruck o' them kine clost by hyar 'bout a hour ago, full fare arter a b'r. Durn 'em, whathev they got to do wi' b'r' huntin'—a parcel o' brats o' boys! Jess as much as this chile kin do to keep his ole karkedge from starvin', an' thar's the gurl, too, growin' up, an' nuttin' purvied for her but this ole shanty an' the patch o' gurden groun'. I'd pull up sticks an' go wi' ye, only for one thing."

"What's that, Rook?"

"Wal—wal; I don't mind tellin' you, Dick. The gurl's good-lookin', an' thar's a rich young feller mears a bit sweet on her. I don't much like him myself, but he air rich, or's boun' to be when the old one goes under. He's an only son, an' they've got one of the slickest cotton plantations in all Arkansaw."

"Ah, well; if you think he means marryin' your girl, you had perhaps better stay where you are."

"Marry her! Durn him, I'll take care o' thet. Poor as I am myself, an' as you know, Dick Tarleton, no better than I moult be, she hain't no knowin' 'bout thet. My little girl air as innocent as a young doe. I'll take precious care nobody don't come the humbug-game over her. In coarse you're gwine to take your young-'un along wi' ye."

"Of course."

"Wal; he'll be better out o' hyar anyhow. Thar a wild lot, the young fellars 'bout these parts; an' I don't think over friendly wi' him. 'Tall events he don't suit wi' them. They twit him 'bout his Injun blood, an' thar sort o' thng."

"Curse them! he's got my blood."

"True emf—true enuf; an' ef they knew thet, it wouldn't be likely to get much favor for him. You dad well in makin' him pass under the name o' the mother. Ef the folks 'bout hyar only knewed he war the son o' Dick Tarleton, thet—"

"Hush! Shut up, Jerry Rock! Enough that you know it. I hope you've never said a word of that to the boy. I trusted you."

"An' ye trusted to a true man. Wi' all my backslidin', I've been true to you, Dick. The boy knows nutthin' 'bout what you've been, nor me neyther. He air as innocent as my own gurl Lena, tho' of a different nater altogether. Tho' he be three parts white, he's got the Injun in him as much as ef he'd been the color o' copper. Let's see: it air now nigh on six years gone since ye see'd him? Wal; he's wonderful growed up, an' good-lookin'; an' thar ain't anythin' 'bout these parts kin tackle onto him for stren'th. He kin bark a squirrel wi' the pea-rifle, tho' thet won't count for much now, ef ye're gwine to set him gatherin' these hyar donicks an' durt. Arter all, thet may be best for him. Huntin' ain't no account any more. I'd gi'n it up myself if I ked git some easier way o' keepin' my in'ards serpled."

The man to whom these remarks were made did not give much attention to the last of them. A proud fire was in his eye as he listened to the eulogy passed upon the youth, who was his son by Mary Robideau, the half-breeding daughter of a famous fur-trader. Perhaps, too, he was thinking of the youth's mother, long since dead.

"He will soon be here?" he inquired, rousing himself from his reverie.

"Oughter," was the reply. "Only went wi' my gurl to the store to git some fixin's. It air in Helena, 'bout three mile by the old trace. Oughter be back by this. I war expectin' them afore you kin in."

"What's that?" asked Tarleton, as a huge bear-hound sprung from his recumbent position on the hearth, and ran growling to the door.

"Them, I reckon. But it moun't be; that's plenty o' other people about. Make safe, Dick, an' go in thar into the gurl's room, till I rickanelers."

The guest was about to act upon the hint, when a light footstep outside, followed by the friendly whimpering of the hound and the soft voice of her on whom the dog was fawning, caused him to keep his place.

In another second, like a bright sunbeam, a young girl—Lena Rook—stepped softly over the threshold.

CHAPTER VI.

A CRY OF DISTRESS.

LENA ROOK knew the father of Pierre, and curtsied as she came in. It was six years since she had seen him; but she still remembered the man who had stayed some days at her father's house, and left be-

bind him a boy, who had afterward proved such a pleasant playmate.

"What's Pierre?" asked her father. "Didn't he kum back from Helena along wi' ye?"

The guest simultaneously asked a similar question, for both had noticed a slight shadow on the countenance of the girl.

"He did," answered she, "as far as the clearing in the cane-brake just over the creek."

"He stopped that? What for?"

"There was a party of hunters—boys."

"Who mout they be?"

"There was Alf Brandon and Bill Buck, and young master Randall, the judge's son, and there was Jeff Grubbs, the son of Mr. Grubbs that keeps the store, and Slaughter's son, and another boy I don't remember ever seeing before."

"A precious pack o' young scamp-graces—every mother's son o' em, 'ceptin' the one you didn't know, an' he can't be much different, seein' the kump'n' he air in. What war they a-doin'?"

"They had hounds and horses. They had killed a bear."

"Killed a b'ar! Then that's the lot that went skurryin' up the crik' while ago. Durn 'em! they never killed the b'ar. The houn's did it for them. Ye see how it air, Dick? Who the Etarnal ked make his bread out o' hunting hyar, when sech goslin's as them goes screamin' through the woods wi' a hull pack o' houn's to drive the game hellward. How d'ye know, gurl, that they've killed a b'ar?"

"I saw it lyin' on the ground, and the skin hanging to a tree."

"Skinned it too, did they?"

"Yes. They had a fire, and they had been roasting and eating some of it. I think they had been drinking, too. They looked as if they had, and I could smell whisky about the place."

"But what kept Pierre among 'em?"

"They were trying who could hang longest to the branch of a tree. As Pierre was coming past, Alf Brandon stopped him, and challenged him to try too. They offered to make a bet—their rifles, I think—and Pierre consented, and I came away."

"Pierre shed have kum along wi' ye, and left them to theirselves. I know Alf Brandon don't owe the boy any good will, nor Bill Buck neyther, nor any o' the hull lot. I reck'n they must a' riled him, an' rousted his spirit a bit."

As the old hunter said this, he stepped over the threshold of the door, and stood outside, as if looking out for the coming of Dick Tarleton's son.

Seeing that he was listening, the other two, to avoid making noise, conversed in a low tone.

"I kin hear thar houn's," remarked Rook, speaking back into the cabin. "Thar's a gowl! Durn me if they hain't started sunthin'. Thar they go, an' the cur yellin' arter them as ef hell war let loose. Wonder what it kin mean. Some varmint must a' crawled right into thar camp. Wal, Pierre ain't like to 'go' gone along wi' 'em, seein' as he's got no host. I reck'n we'll soon see him hyar, an' maybe Alf Brandon's rifle along wi' 'em. Ef it's been who can hang longest to the branch o' a tree, I back him ag'in the toughest-tailed 'possum in all these parts. Ef that be the tarms o' the wager, he'll git the gun."

The old hunter returned chuckling into the cabin. Some conversation passed between him and his daughter about getting dinner for their guest; and then, thinking that the expected Pierre was a long time in showing himself, he went out again and stood listening as before. He had not been many moments in this attitude, when he was seen to start, and listen more eagerly, with an uneasy look.

Tarleton, looking from the inside, saw this, and so, too, the girl.

"What is it, Jerry?" inquired the former, moving hastily toward the door.

"Darned if I know. I heerd a shout as if somebody war in trouble. Yes, that's ag'in' By the Eternal, it's Pierre's voice."

"It is, father," said Lena, who had glided out, and stood listening by his side. "It is his voice. I could tellit anywhere. I fear they have been doing something. I'm sure those boys don't like him, and I know they were drinking."

"No, Dick, don't you go. Some of them young fellars might know you. I'll go myself, an' Lena kin cum along wi' me. My gun, gurl! An' you may cum too, ole Sneezier. You'd be more'n a match for the hull pack o' thar curs. I tell ye, you shan't go, Dick. Git inside the shanty, an' stay thar till we kum back. Maybe 'tain't much. Some lark o' them scamp-graces. Anyhow, this chile'll soon see it all straight. Now, Lena! Arter yur ole dad."

At the termination of this chapter of instructions, the hunter, long rifle in hand, hound and daughter close following upon his heels, strode off at the double quick in the direction in which he had heard the cries.

For some moments the guest stood outside the door, apparently unresolved as to whether he would stay behind or follow his host. But a shadow passing over his face showed that some sentiment—perhaps fear—stronger than affection for his son, was holding him in check; and yielding to this, he turned and stepped back into the shanty.

A remarkable looking man was this old acquaintance of Jerry Rook; as unlike the hunter as Hyperion to the Satyr. He was still under forty years of age, while Jerry had outlived the frosts of sixty winters. But the difference between their ages was nothing compared with that existing in other respects. While Jerry, crooked in limb, and corrugated in skin, was the beau ideal of an old borderer, with a spice of the pirate in him to boot, Richard Tarleton stood straight as a lance, and had been handsome as Apollo. Jerry, clad in his half-Indian costume of skin-cap and buck-leather, looked like the wild woods around him, while his guest, in white linen shirt and shifting broadcloth, seemed better suited for the

streets of that city from which his conversation showed him to have lately come.

What strange chance had brought two such men together? And what stranger episode has kept them bound in a confidence neither seemed desirous of divulging.

It must have been a dark deed on the side of Dick Tarleton—a strong fear that could hinder a father from rushing to the rescue of his son!

CHAPTER VII.

THE BODY TAKEN DOWN.

The glade is silent as a grave-yard, with a tableau in it far more terribly solemn than tombs. A fire smolders unheeded in its center; and near it the carcass of some huge creature, upon which the black vultures, soaring aloft, have fixed their eager eyes.

And they glance, too, at something upon the trees. There is a broad, black skin suspended over a branch; but there is more upon another branch; there is a man!"

But for the motions late made by him, the birds would ere this have descended to their banquet.

They may come down now, he makes no more motion, utters no cry, to keep them in the air affrighted. He hangs still, silent, apparently dead. Even the scream of a young girl, rushing out from the underwood, does not stir him; nor yet the shout of an old man, sent forth under like excitement.

Not any more when they are close to the spot, with arms almost touching him—arms upraised and voices loud in lamentation.

"It is Pierre! Oh, father, they have hanged him—dead—he is dead!"

"Hush, gurl! Maybe not," cries the old man, taking hold of the loose limbs, and easing the strain of the rope. "Quick! come under here. Catch hold as you see me, and bear up with all y'ur stren' th. I must git my knis' out, and spring up'ard to git at the durned rope. That's it. Steady, now!"

The young girl has glided forward, and, as directed, taken hold of the hanging limbs. It is a terrible task. A trying, terrible task, even for a backwoods maiden. But she is equal to it: and, bending to it with all her strength, she holds up what she believes to be the dead body of her playmate and companion. Her young heart is almost bursting with agony, as she feels that in the limbs embraced there is no motion—not even a tremor.

"Hold on hard," urges her father. "That's a stout gurl. I won't be a minit."

While giving this admonition, he is hurrying to get hold of his knife.

It is out, and open.

With a spring upward, as if youth had returned to his sinews, the old hunter succeeds in reaching the rope. It is severed with a "snig," and the body bearing the girl along with it, drops to the ground.

The noose is instantly slackened, and twitched off; the old hunter, with both hands, embraces the throat, pressing the windpipe back into its place; then, placing his ear close to the chest, listens. With eyes set in agony and suspense, Lena listens too, to hear what her father may say.

"Oh, father! do you think he is dead? Tell me he still lives."

"Not much sign o' it. Heigh! I thort I see'd a tremble. You run to the shanty. Thar's some corn whisky in the cuberd. It's in the stone bottle. Bring it hyar. Go, gurl, an' run as fast as yer legs can carry ye!"

The girl springs to her feet, and is about starting off.

"Stay! stay! It won't do to let Dick know. This'll drive him mad. Durn me if I know what ter do. Alter ar, he may as well be told on. He must find it out, sooner or later. Thet must he, and dog-gone, it won't do to lose time. Ye may go. No, stay. No, go, go, an' fetch the bottle. Ye needn't tell him what it's for. But he'll know that's sunthin' wrong. He'll be sure to know. He'll come back along wi' ye. That's equilly sartin. Well, let him. Maybe that's the best way. Yes, fetch him back wi' ye. Thar's no danger o' them chaps showin' here—arter this, I reck'n. Hurry him along, but don't forgit the bottle. Now, gurl, quick as lightnin'. Quick!"

If not quite so quick as lightning, yet as fast as her feet can carry her, the young girl starts along the trace leading to the shanty. She is not thinking of the sad tidings she bears to him who hides in her father's cabin. Her own sorrow is sufficient for the time, and stifles every other thought in her heart.

The old hunter does not stand idly watching her. He is busy with the body, doing what he can to restore life. He feels that it is warm. He fancies it is still breathing.

"How hev it come abeout?" he asked himself, scanning the corpse for an explanation. "Tied one o' his hands an' not the o'ther! Thar's a puzzle. What kin it mean?"

"They must a' meant hangin' anyhow—poor young fellar! They've did it, sure. For what? What ked he bev done to hev angered them? Won the rifle for one thing; an' that they've tuk away.

"The hull thing has been a trick—a durned, infernal, helliniferous trick, o' some sort.

"Maybe they only meant it for a joke? Maybe they only intended scarin' him; an' Jess then that varmint kim along an' set the houn's onto it an' them arter, an' they sneaked off 'ithout thinkin' o' him?"

"Wonder of that war the way o't?"

"Ef it warn't, what ked a' pervoked 'em to this drefful deed? Durn me if I kin think o' a reezeen!"

"Wal—joke or no joke. It hev ended in a treigdy—a crewel treigdy. Poor young fellar!"

"An' dog-gone my cats ef I don't make 'em pay for it—every mother's chick o' 'em. Yes, Mr. Alf Brandon, an' you, Master Randall, an' you, Bill Buck, an' all, every one o' ya."

"Ha! I've got a idea—a durned, splendiferous

ideal! By the Etarnal, I kin make a good thing out o' this. Well thought o', Jeremiah Rook! Ye've had a hard life o' lately, but ye'll be a fool ef ye don't live eezier for the futur—a durn greenhorn o' a saphead. Ho, ho, ye young bloods an' bu'sters! I'll make ye pay for this joke, in a way ye ain't thinking o'. Cussed ef I don't."

"What's fust to be done? He mustn't lie hyar. Somebody mout come along, an' thet 'ud spoil all. Ef 'twar only meant as a joke, they mout come to see the eend o't. I heerd shots. Thet must a' been the finish o' the anymal. Tain't likely they'll kum back, but they may, an' ef so, they moutn't see this. I'll tell them I carried the corp away an' berried it. They won't care to inquire too close 'beout it."

"No, Dick won't object. I won't let him object. What good would it do him, an' o'ther'd do me good—a power o' good. Keep me for the balance o' my days. Let Dick go a gold-gatherin' his own way. I'll go mine."

"Thar ain't any time to lose. I must tote him to the shanty. Load enough for my old limbs. But I'll meet them a-comin', an' Dick an' the gurl kin help me."

This strange soliloquy does not occupy much time. It is spoken *sotto voce*, while the speaker is still engaged in an effort to resuscitate life; nor is he yet certain that Pierre Robideau is dead while raising his body from the ground, and bearing it out of the glade.

Staggering under the load—for the youth is of no light weight—he re-enters the trace conducting to his own domicil. The old bear-hound slinks after, with a large piece of flesh between his teeth, torn from the carcass of the butchered bear.

The vultures, no longer frayed by man's presence, living or dead, drop down to the earth, and strut boldly up to their banquet.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OATH OF SECRECY.

WHILE the black buzzards are quarreling over the carcass, not far off there is another carcass stretched upon the sword—also of a bear.

But the grouping around it is different—six hunters on horseback, and double the number of dogs.

They are the boy-hunters late bivouacking in the glade; and the bear is the same that had strayed unwittingly into their camp.

The animal has just succumbed under the trenchant teeth of their dogs, and a bullet or two from their rifles. Nor have the hounds come off unscathed. Two or three of them—the young and rash—lie dead beside the quarry they assisted in dragging down.

The hunters had just ridden up, and halted over the black, bleeding mass. The chase, short and hurried, is at an end; and now, for the first time since leaving the glade, do they seem to have stayed for reflection. That which strikes them is, or should be, fearful.

"My God!" cries young Randall, "the Indian! We've left him hanging!"

"We have, by the Lord!" seconds Spencer, all six turning pale, and exchanging glances of consternation.

"If he have let go his hold—"

"If! He must have let go; and long before this. It's full twenty minutes since we left the glade. It isn't possible for him to have hung so long—not possible."

"And if he's let go?"

"If he has done that, why, then he's dead."

"But are you sure the noose would close upon his neck?—you, Bill Buck, and Alf Brandon—it was you two that arranged this."

"Bah!" rejoins Buck, "you see'd that, same as we. It's bound to tighten when he drops. Of course we didn't mean that; and who'd a' thought o' a b'ar runnin' straight into us in this way? Darn it, if the nigger has dropped, he's dead by this time, and there's an end of it. There's no help for it now."

"What's to be done, boys?" asks Grubbs. "There'll be an ugly account to settle, I reckon."

There is no answer to this question or remark. On the faces of all there is an expression of strange significance. It is less repentance for the act, than fear for the consequences. Some of the younger and less reckless of the party show some slight signs of sorrow, but among all, fear is the predominant feeling.

"What's to be done, boys?" again asks Grubbs. "We must do something. It won't do to leave things as they are."

"Hadn't we better ride back?" suggests Spencer.

"That's no use goin' now," answers the son of the horse-dealer. "That is, for the savin' of him. If nobody else has been thar since we left, why then the nigger's dead—dead as Jule Caesar."

"Do you think any one might have come along—in time to save him?"

This question is asked with an eagerness in which all are sharers. They would be rejoiced to think it could be answered in the affirmative.

"There might," replies Randall, catching at the slight show of hope. "The trace runs through the glade—right past the spot. A good many people go that way. Some one might have come along in time. At all events, we should go back and see. It can't make things any worse."

"Yes, we had better go back," assents the son of the planter, and then to strengthen the proposal, "we had better go for another purpose."

"What, Alf?" ask several.

"That's easily answered. If the Indian's hung himself, we can't help it."

"You'd make it appear suicide. You forgot that we tied his left arm. It would never look like it. He couldn't have done that himself."

"I don't mean that."

"What then?"

"If he's hanged, he's hanged, and dead before

this. We didn't hang him nor didn't intend it. That's clear."

"I don't think the law can touch us," suggests the son of the judge."

"But it may give us trouble, and that must be avoided."

"How do you propose to do, Alf?"

"It's an old story that dead men tell no tales, and buried ones less."

"There's a good grist o' truth in that," interpolates Buck.

"The suicide wouldn't stand. Not likely to. The cord might be cut away from the wrist, but then there's Rook's daughter. She saw him stop with us, and to find him swinging by the neck only half an hour after, would be but poor proof of his having committed self-murder. No, boys, he must be put clean out of sight."

"That's right—that's the only safe way," assent all the others.

"Come on, then. We mustn't lose a minute about it. The girl may come back to see what's keeping him; or old Rook himself may be straying that way, or somebody else traveling along the trace. Come on!"

"Stay!" exclaims Randall. "There's something yet—something that should be done before any chance separates us."

"What is it?"

"We're all alike in this ugly business—in the same boat! It don't matter who contrived it, or who fixed the rope. We all agreed to it. Is not that so?"

"Yes, all. I for one acknowledge it."

"And I."

"And L."

All six give their assent, showing, at least, loyalty to one another.

"Well, then," continues Randall, "we must be true to each other. We must swear it, and now, before going further. I propose we all take an oath."

"We'll do that. You, Randall, you repeat it over, and we'll follow you."

"Head your horses round then, face to face."

The horses are drawn into a circle, their heads together, with muzzles almost touching.

Randall proceeds, the rest repeating after him:

"We swear, each and every one of us, never to make known, by act, word or deed, the way in which the half-breed Indian, called Choc, came by his death, and we mutually promise never to divulge the circumstances connected with that affair, even if called upon in a court of law; and finally, we swear to be true to each other in keeping this promise till death."

"Now!" says Brandon, as soon as the six young scoundrels have shaken hands over their abominable compact, "let us on, and put the Indian out of sight. I know a pool close by deep enough to drown him. If he do get discovered, that will look better than hanging."

There is no reply to this astute proposal; and though it helps to allay their apprehensions, they advance in solemn silence toward the scene of their deserted bivouac.

There is not one of them who does not dread to go back into that glade, so late gay with their rude roystering; not one who would not give the horse he is riding, and the gun he carries in his hand, never to have entered it.

But the dark deed has been done, and another must needs be accomplished to conceal it.

CHAPTER IX.

A COMPULSORY COMPACT.

HEAVY with apprehension, rather than remorse for their crime, the six hunters ride on toward the clearing. They avoid the traveled track, lest they may meet some one upon it, and approach through the thick timber. Guiding their horses so as to make the least noise, and keeping the hounds in check, they advance slowly and with caution.

Some of the less courageous are reluctant to proceed, fearing the spectacle that is before them. Even the loud-talking Slaughter would gladly give up the newly-conceived design, but for the manifest danger of leaving it undone.

Near the edge of the opening, still screened from their view by the interposing trunks and cane-culms, they again halt and hold council—this time speaking in whispers.

"We should not all go forward," suggests the son of the tavern-keeper. "Better only one or two at first, to see how the land lies."

"That would be better," chimed in Spencer.

"Who'll go, then?"

Buck and Brandon are pointed out, by the eyes of the others resting upon them. These two have been leaders throughout the whole affair. Without showing poltroon, they cannot hang back now.

They volunteer for the duty; but not without show of reluctance. It is anything but agreeable.

"Let's leave our horses. We'll be better without them. If there's any one on the ground we can steal back without being seen."

It is the young planter's proposition, and Buck assents to it.

They slip out of their saddles, pass the bridles to two of those who stay behind, and then, like a couple of cougars stealing upon the unsuspecting fawn, silently make their way through the underwood.

The clearing is soon under their eyes, with all it contains. There is the carcass of the bear, black with buzzards, and the skin still hanging from the tree. But the object of horror they expected to see hanging upon another tree is not there. That sight is spared them. There is no body on the branch, no corpse underneath it. Living or dead, the Indian is gone.

His absence is far from reassuring them; the more so, as on scanning the branch, they perceive still

suspended from it a piece of the rope they had so adroitly set to insnare him. Even across the glade they can see that it has been severed with the clean cut of a knife, instead of, as they could have wished, giving way under his weight.

Who could have cut the rope? Himself? Impossible. Where was the hand to have done it? He had none to spare for such a purpose. Happy for them to have thought that he had.

They skulk around the glade to get nearer—still going by stealth, and in silence. The buzzards perceive them; and though dull birds, reluctant to leave their foul feast, they fly up with affright. Something in the air of the two stalkers seemed to startle them, as if they, too, knew them to have been guilty of a crime.

"Yes; the rope's been cut; that's sartin' a buck, as they stand under it. A clean sheep o' a knife-blade. Who the devil c'u'd 'a' done it?"

"I can't think," answers the young planter, reflecting. "As like as not, old Jerry Rook, or it might have been a stray traveler."

"Whoever it was, I hope the cuss came in time. If not—"

"If not, we're in for it. Bless'd if I wouldn't liked it better to've found him hanging. There might have been some chance of hiding him out of the way. But now, if he's been dropped upon dead, we're done for. Whoever found him will know all about it. Lena Rook knew we were here, and her sweet lips can't be shut, I suppose. If 't had been only Rook himself, the old scoundrel, there might have been a chance. Money would go a long ways with him; and I'm prepared—so would we all be—to buy his silence."

"Lucky y'r riddry for that, Mr. Alfred Brandon. That's Jess what Rook, 'the old scoundrel,' wants, an' Jess the very thing he means to insist upon havin'. Now name y'r price."

If a dead body had been dropped down from the branch above them, it could not have startled the two culprits more than did the living form of Jerry Rook, as it came gliding out of the thick cane close by the stem of the tree.

"You, Jerry Rook!" exclaim both together, and in a tone that came trembling through their teeth. "You here?"

"I'm hyar, gentlemen; and Jess in time, seein' as ye wanted me. Now, name y'r price; or shall I fix it for ye? Tain't no use 'feetin' inncerence o' what I mean. Ye both know clur enuf, an' so do this chile, all 'beout it. Ye've hanged Pierre Robideau, as lived wi' me, at my shanty."

"We did not."

"Ye did. Hanged him by the neck till he war dead, as the judges say. I kin hyar by chance an' cut him down; but not till twar too late."

"Is that true, Rook? Are you speaking the truth? Did you find him dead?"

"Dead as a buck arter gittin' a bullet from Jerry Rook's rifle. If you don't b'lieve it, maybe ye'd stop down to my shanty and see him streeched out?"

"No—no; but we didn't do it. We didn't intend it. By heaven—"

"No sw'arin', young fellars. I don't care what y'r intentions war, ye've dedud the deed. I seed'how it war, an' all about it. Ye hung him up for sport—putty sport that war—an' ye run off forgitin' all about him. Y'r sport hev been his death."

"My God! We are sorry to hear it. We had no thought of such a thing. A bear came along and set the hounds up."

"Oh, a b'ar, war it? I thort so. An' ye tuk arter the b'ar an' let the poor young fellar swing?"

"It is true. We can't deny it. We had no intention of what has happened. We thought only of the bear."

"Wal, now ye'll hev to think o' somethin' else. What d'y'e intend doin'?"

"It's a terrible ugly affair. We're very sorry."

"No doubt ye air, an' ye'd be a precious sight sorrier if the young fellar hed any kinfolk to look arter it an' call ye to account. As it is, tha ain't nobody but me, an' he warn't no kin o' mine—only a stayin' wi' me. That may make it eezier for you."

"But what have you done with—the—the body?"

Brandon asks the question, hesitatingly, and thinking of Rook's daughter.

"The body? Wal, I've carried it to the shanty, an' put it out o' sight. I didn't want the hul country to be on fire till I'd fust see'd ye. As yet tha ain't nobody the wiser."

"And—"

"An' what?"

"Your daughter?"

"Oh, my darter don't count. She air a 'bedient gurl, an' ain't gwine to go blabbin' while I put the stopper on her tongue. Don't ye be skeeart 'beout that."

"Jerry Rook!" says Brandon, recovering confidence from the old hunter's "hint," "it's no use beginnin' basket-faced over this business. We've got into a scrape and we know it. And you know it too. We had no intention to commit a crime; it was all a lark. But since it's turned out ugly, we must make the best we can of it. You're the only one who can make it disagreeable for us, and you won't. I know you won't. We're willing to behave handsomely if you act otherwise. You can say this young fellow has gone away—down to Orleans or anywhere else. I've heard you once say he was not to be with you much longer. That will explain to your neighbors why he is missing. To be plain, then, what will be the price of such an explanation?"

"Durn me, Alf Brandon, ef you oughtn't to be a lawyer or a preacher, or somethin' o' the sort. You hit it so adzactly. Wal; let's see! I risk some'at by keepin' y'r secret—a good some'at. I'll stan' a chance o' bein' tak up for aidin' an' abettin'. Wal; let's see! Thar war six o' ye. My gurl tol me so,

an' I kin see it by the tracks o' y'ur critters. Whar's the other four?"

"Not far off."

"Wal, ye'd better bring 'em all up hyar. I s'pose they're all's deep in the mud as you in the mire. Besides, it air too important a p'int to be settled by deputy. I'd like all o' y'ur lot to be on the groun', an' judge for themselves."

"Agreed—they shall come. Bring them up, Bill."

Bill does as directed, and the six amateur hunters are once more assembled in the glade, but with very different feelings from those stirring them when there before. Bill has told them all, even to the proposal made by Rook; and they sit upon their horses downcast, ready to consent to his terms.

"Six o'ye," says the hunter, apparently calculating the price of the silence to be imposed upon him, "all o' ye sons o' rich men, an' all able to pay me a hundred dollars a year for the term o' my nateral life. Six hundred dollars. Tain't much to talk about; Jess keep my ole karkiss from starvin'. Huntin's gone to the dogs 'beout hyar, an' you fellars hev hed somethin' to do in sendin' it thar. So, on the account o' itself, ye oughter be only too happy in pervidin' for one whose bizness ye've spil'd. It air only by way o' penshum. Hundred dollars apiece, an' that reg'lary paid pre-annum. Ye all know what that's for. Do ye consent?"

"I do."

"And I."

"And L."

And so signify the six.

"Wal, then, ye may go hum. Ye'll hear no more 'beout this bizness from me—'cepin' any o' ye shed be sech a dodrott fool as ter fall behind wi' y'r payments. Ef ye do, by the Etarnal—"

"You needn't, Jerry Rook," interposes Brandon, to avoid hearing the threat. "You may depend upon us. I shall myself be responsible for all."

"Enuf sed. About this b'ar-skin hangin' on the tree. I s'pose ye don't want to tote that wi' ye? I may take it, may I, by way o' earnest to the bargain?"

No one opposes his request. The old hunter is made welcome to the spoils of the chase—both those on the spot and in the forest further off. They who obtained them are but too glad to surrender every souvenir that may remind them of that ill-spent day.

Slow, and with better thoughts, they ride off—each to return to his own home—leaving Jerry Rook alone, to chuckle over the accursed compact.

And this he does, to his satisfaction.

"Now!" cries he, sweeping the bear-skin from the branch and striding off along the trace, "now to make things squar' wi' Dick Tarleton. Ef I can do that, I'll sit this day down in the kallinder as bein' the luckiest o' my life."

The sound of human voices has ceased in the glade. There is heard only the "whish" of wings as the buzzards return to their interrupted repast.

CHAPTER X.

VOWS OF VENGEANCE.

The sun is down, and there is a deep darkness over the firmament; deeper under the shadows of the forest. But for the gleam of lightning-bugs, the forms of two men, standing under the trees, could scarce be distinguished.

By such fickle light it is impossible to read their features; but by their voices may they be recognized, engaged as they are in an earnest conversation.

The scene is on the bank of the sluggish stream or bayou that runs past the dwelling of the hunter, and not twenty yards from the shanty itself. Out of this they have just stepped, apparently for the purpose of carrying on their conversation beyond the earshot of any one.

The faint light burning within the cabin—that part of it that serves as a sitting-room and kitchen—is from the fire. But there is no one there—no living thing, save the hound slumbering upon the hearth.

A still duller light from a dip candle shows through the slits of a shut door, communicating with an inner apartment. One gazing in might see the silhouette of a young girl, seated by the side of a low bedstead, on which lies stretched the form of a youth apparently asleep. At all events, he stirs not; and the girl regards him in silence. There is just enough light to show that her looks are full of anxiety or sadness; but not sufficient to reveal which of the two, or whether both.

The two men outside have stopped by the stem of a large cottonwood, and are but continuing a dialogue commenced by the kitchen-fire, that had been kindled for the cooking of the evening meal, now eaten. It is still warm autumn weather, and the bears have begun to hibernate.

"I tell ye, Dick," says the old hunter, whose turn it is to speak, "for you to talk o' revenge, an' that sort o' thing, air the durnedest kind o' nonsense. Take it afore the coort i'deed! What good 'ud do ye? They'd be the coort an' the jedges—that is tha fathers w'u'd—an' ye'd stan' as much chance o' gittin' jisticie out o' them as ye w'u'd o' lightin' y'r pipe at one o' them thar fire-bugs. They've got the money, an' the influeunce, an' tha's no law in these parts 'beout the one or the t'other."

"I know it—I know it," says Tarleton, with bitter emphasis.

"I reck'n ye've reezun to know it, Dick. Now, you hain't money to spare for sech puriss, an' thare on that score 'ud stan' no chance. Besides, thar's the old churge ag'in ye, an' ye dasen't appear to persecute. It's the same men, ye see, or the sons o' the same—"

"Curse them! the very same: Buck, Brandon, Randall, every one of them. Oh, God! there is destiny in it. Twas their fathers who ruined me, blighted my whole life, and now the sons to have done this! Strange—fearfully strange!"

"Wal, it air kewrious, I admit; an' do look as ef the devil had a hand in't. But he's playin' ag'in ye, Dick, yet; an' he'd beat ye, sure, ef ye try to fout ag'in him. Take the device I've gi'n ye, an' git out o' his an' thar way as fur's ye kin. California's a good way off. Go thar, as ye intended. Git rich ef ye kin, an' ye think ye hev a chance. Do thet, an' then kum back hyar of ye like. When yur pockets air well filled with them than shinin' pebbles, ye kin command the law, an' hev as much o' it as ye've a mind to."

"I shall have it—for my own wrongs, as for his, poor boy!"

"Wal, I reckin you hev reezun. They used ye turned ill, that's no doubt o' thet. Still, Dick, ye must acknowledge that appearances war dreadfully ag'in ye."

"Against me—perdition! From the way you say that, Jerry Rook, I might fancy that you, too, believed it. If I thought you did—"

"But I didn't an' don't—hever a bit o' it, Dick. I know'd you was innocent o' thet."

"Jerry Rook, I have sworn to you, and now swear again, that I am as innocent of that girl's murder as if I had never seen her. I acknowledge that she used to meet me in the woods and on the spot where she was found with a bullet through her heart, and my own pistol lying empty beside her. The pistol was stolen from my house by him who did the deed. It was one of two men; which I could never tell. It was either Buck or Brandon, the fathers of these fellows who have been fighting to-day. Like father, like son. Both were after the girl, and jealous of me. They knew I had outshined them; and that, no doubt, was their reason for destroying her. One of the other did it; and if I'd known which, I'd have sent him after her long ago. I didn't wish to kill the wrong man; and to say the truth, the girl was nothing to me. But after what's happened to-day, I'll have satisfaction on them, and their sons too, every one who has had a hand in this day's work."

"Wal, wal; but let it stan' over till ye kum back from California. I tell ye, Dick, ye kin do nothin' now 'ceptin' to git yur neck into a runnin' rope. The old lot are as bitter ag'in' ye now as they war thet day when they had ye stannin' under a branch, wi' the noose half tightened 'round yur thrapple; an' ef ye hedn't got out o' thar clutches, why then thar'd a' been an eend o' it. Ef you war to show hyar ag'in, it wud be jest the same thing, an' no chance o' yur escapin' a second time. Tharfore, go to California. Gether as many o' them donicks, an' as much o' the dust, as ye kin lay yur claws on. Kum back; an' maybe then I mout do some at to 'sist ye to the satisfashun ye speak o'."

Tarleton stands silent—seeming to reflect. Strange that in all he has said, there is no tone of sorrow; only anger! The grief he should feel for his lost son—where is it? Has it passed away so soon? Or is it only kept under by the keener agony of revenge?

With some impatience, his counselor continues:

"I've gi'en you good reezuns for goin'; an' ef you don't take my device, Dick, you'll do a durned foolish thing. Put for California, an' git gold; gold fast, an' let the revenge kum arter."

"No!" answered Tarleton, with an emphasis telling of fixed determination. "The revenge, Jerry Rook, the revenge. For me the revenge first, and then California! I'm determined to have satisfaction, and if the law won't give it—"

"It won't, Dick—it won't."

"Then this will." There is just enough light from the fire-flies to show Jerry Rook the white ivory handle of a large knife—or of the sort quaintly called "Arkansas toothpick"—held up for a moment in Tarleton's hand.

But there is not enough to show Tarleton the dark cloud of disappointment passing over the face of the old hunter, as he perceives by this exhibition that his counsels have been spoken to no purpose.

"And now," said the guest, straightening himself up, as if about to make departure, "I've business that takes me to Helena. I expect to meet that fellow I've been telling you of, who gave me the gold. He's to come there by an up-river boat, and should be there now. As you know I've to do my travelin' between two days, you may expect me back before sun-up. I hope you won't be disturbed by my early coming."

"Come an' go when ye like, Dick. Thar ain't much saramony 'bout my shanty. All hours air the same to me."

Tarleton buttons up his coat, in the breast of which is concealed the before-mentioned "toothpick"; and without saying another word, strikes off for the road leading toward the river, and the town of Helena. It is but little better than a bridle-trace; and he is soon lost to sight under the shadows of its overhanging trees.

Jerry Rook keeps his place, standing close to the trunk of the cottonwood. When his guest has gone beyond reach of hearing, an exclamation escapes through his half-shut teeth, expressive of bitter chagrin.

CHAPTER XI. DICK TARLETON.

In the conversation recorded, Dick Tarleton has thrown some light on his own history. Not much more is needed to elucidate the statement made by him—that he dare only do his traveling between two days. He has admitted almost enough to serve the purposes of our tale, which refers not to him; though a few words more, to fill up the sketch, may not be out of place.

Richard Tarleton was, in early life, one of those wild spirits by no means uncommon along the frontier line of civilization. By birth and breeding a gentleman, idleness, combined with evil inclinations, had led him into evil ways, and these, in their turn, had

brought to beggary. Too proud to beg, and too lazy to enter upon any industrious calling, he had sought to earn his living by cards, and other courses equally disreputable. Vicksburg, and other towns along the lower Mississippi, furnished him with many victims, till at length he made a final settlement in the State of Arkansas—at that time only a territory, and as such the safest refuge for all characters of a similar kind. The town of Helena became his head-quarters.

In this grand emporium of scamps and speculators, there was nothing in Dick Tarleton's profession to make him conspicuous. Had he confined himself to card-playing, he might have passed muster among the most respectable citizens of the place or its proximity—many of whom, like himself, were professed "sportsmen." But Dick was not long in Helena before he began to be suspected of certain specialties of sport—among others, that of *nigger-running*. Long absences unaccounted for strange company in which he was seen in strange places—both the company and the places already suspected—with, at times, a plentiful supply of money drawn from unknown sources—at length fixed upon Dick Tarleton a stigma of a still darker kind than that of card-playing or even sharping. It became the belief that he was a *negro-stealer*—a crime unpardonable in all parts of planter-land—Arkansas not excepted.

With this belief, every other stigma that might become connected with his name was deemed credible; and no one would have doubted Dick Tarleton's capability of committing whatever atrocity might be charged to him.

Bad as he was, he was not so bad as represented and believed. A professed "sportsman" of wild and reckless habits, he knew no limits to dissipation and sensual indulgence. Immoral to an extreme degree, it was never proved that he was guilty of those darker crimes with which he stood charged, or suspected; and the suspicions, when probed to the bottom, were generally found to be baseless.

There were few, however, who took this trouble; for, from the first, Dick Tarleton was far from being a favorite among the fellows who surrounded him. He was of haughty habit, presuming on the superiority of birth and education—and something still less easily tolerated—a handsome personal appearance. One of the finest looking men to be seen among the settlers, he was, it need hardly be said, popular among the fair sex—such of them as might be expected to turn their eyes upon a *sportsman*.

One of this class—a young girl of exceeding attractions, but, alas, of tarnished reputation—was, at the time, an inhabitant of Helena. Among her admirers, secret and open, were many young men of the place or of the adjacent plantations. She could count a long list of conquests—numbering names far above her own rank and station in life. Among these were the planter Brandon, the lawyer Randall, and, of lesser note, the horse-dealer Buck. None of these, however, appeared to have been successful in obtaining her smiles, which, according to general belief, were showered on the dissolute but handsome Dick Tarleton.

However it may have gratified the gambler's vanity, it did not add to his popularity. On the contrary, it increased the spite felt for him, and caused the dark suspicions to be oftener repeated.

Such were the circumstances preceding a terrible tragedy that one day startled Helena out of its ordinary tranquillity. The young girl in question was found in the woods at no great distance from the town, in the condition already stated by Dick Tarleton, murdered, and Dick himself was charged with being the murderer.

He was at once arrested, and arraigned, not before a regular court of justice, but one constituted under a tree, and under the presidency of Judge Lynch. It was done in all haste—both the arrest and the trial; and equally quick was the condemnation. The case was so clear. His pistol, the very weapon that had sent the fatal bullet, in the hurry and confusion of escape, let fall upon the ground close by the side of the victim; his relations with the unfortunate girl—some speech he had been heard boasting to utter—a suspected disagreement arising from it, all pointed to Dick Tarleton as the assassin; and by unanimous verdict of his excited judges, prompted by extreme vindictiveness, he was sentenced to hanging upon a tree.

In five minutes more he would have been consigned to this improvised gallows, but for the negligence of his executioners. In their blind fury they had but slightly fastened his hands, while they had forgotten to strip him of his coat. In the pocket of this there chanced to be another pistol—the fellow of that found. Its owner remembered, and in the hour of despair determined on an attempt to escape. Wresting his wrists free from their fastenings, he drew the pistol, discharged it in the face of the man who stood most in his way, and thus clearing a track, sprung off into the woods!

The sudden surprise—the dismay caused by the death of the man shot at—for he fell dead in his tracks—held the others as if spell-bound. When the pursuit commenced, Dick Tarleton was out of sight; and neither Judge Lynch nor his jury ever set eyes on him again.

The woods were scoured all round, and the roads traveled for days by parties sent out in search of him; but all returned without reporting Dick Tarleton or any traces of him.

It was thought that some one must have assisted him in his escape; and suspicion was directed upon a hunter named Rook, who squatted near White river—the Jerry Rook of our tale. But no proof could be obtained of this, and the hunter was left unmolested, though with some additional stain on a character before not reputed very clean.

Such is a brief sketch of the life of Richard Tar-

ton—that portion of it spent in the north-eastern corner of Arkansas. No wonder, with such a record, he felt constrained to do his traveling by night!

Since that fearful episode, now a long time ago, he had not appeared in Helena or the settlements around—at least, not to the eyes of those who would care to betray him. Gone to Texas was the general belief—Texas or some other lawless land, where such crimes are easily condoned. So spoke the *Puritans* of Arkansas, blind to their own especial blemish.

Even Jerry Rook knew not the whereabouts of his old acquaintance, until some six years before, when he had come to his cabin under the shadows of the night, bringing with him a boy whom he hinted at as being his son—the youth who had that day afforded such fatal sport for his atrocious tormentors.

The link between the two men could not have been strong; for the hunter, in taking charge of the boy, had stipulated for his "keep"; and once or twice during the long absence of his father, had shown a disposition to turn him out of doors. Still more of late, and doubly more when Lena showed signs of interference in his favor. Ever, while regarding his daughter, he seemed to dread the presence of Pierre Robideau, as if the youth had stood between him and some favorite scheme he had formed for her future.

There need be nothing to fear now—surely not, if Dick Tarleton would but discharge the debt.

Ah! to suppose this would be to make the grandest of mistakes. The brain of Jerry Rook was at that moment busy revolving more schemes than one. But there was one grand, as it was dire and deadly.

Let our next chapter reveal it.

CHAPTER XII. A TRAITOR'S EPISTLE.

As already chronicled, Dick Tarleton has started along the forest-path, leaving Jerry Rook under the cottonwood tree.

For some time he remains there, motionless as the trunk beside him.

The exclamation of chagrin that escaped him, as the other passed beyond ear-shot, is followed by words of a more definite shape and meaning. It was Dick Tarleton who drew from him the former. It is to him the latter are addressed, though without the intention of their being heard.

"Ye durned fool! ye'd spile my plan, w'u'd ye? An', I'spose, all the same of I war to tell ye o't? But I ain't gwine to do that, nor to hev it spiled neyther by sech a obstenat eduyut as you. Six hundred dollars pre annum air too much o' a good pull to let me go ag'in, slack as that. An' dog-goned of I do let it go, cost what it may to keep holt o' it. Yes, cost what it may!"

The phrase repeated with increased emphasis, along with a sudden change in the attitude of the speaker, shows some sinister determination.

"Dick," he continues, forsaking the apostrophic form, "air a fool in this bizness; a dod-rotted, pursumptuous saphead. He git satisfackshun out o' the lot, ethyer by the law, or otherways! They'd swing him up as soon as see'd; an' he'd be see'd afore he ked harm e'er a one o' them. Them that don't go 'beout' ithout totin' thar knives an' pistols 'long wi' them—any more'n he. An' they'll be jest as ready to use 'em. Ef 't kin to thet, what then? In coarse the hul thing 'd leak out, an' whar'd this child be with his six hundred dollars? Durn Dick Tarleton! Jest for the sake o' a silly revenge he'd be a-sp'ilin' all—leavin' me as I've been all my life, poor as Job's turkey-gobbler."

"It must be prevented—it must!

"How air the thing to be done? Le'see.

"Thar's one way I knows o', that appears to be eozy enuf. Dick he's goed to the town, an's boun' to kum back ag'in' from the town. That's no reezun why he shed kum back hyar. Thar's nobody to miss him. The gurl won't know he hain't gone for good. He's boun' to kum back afore mornin', an' afore they's sunlight showin' amon the tree. He'll be sartin to kum along the trace, known' thar's not much danger o' meetin' anybody, or bein' rocc'ized in the dark. Why sheden't meet him?"

With this interrogatory, an expression, fie dish, though unseen by human eye, passes over the face of the old hunter. A fiendish thought has sprung into his heart.

"Why sheden't I?" he pursues, reiterating the reflection. "What air Dick Tarleton to me? I hain't no partikler spite ag'in' him—that is, ef he'd do what I've devised him to do. But ef he won't—ef he won't—"

"An' he won't. Le's said so—he's swore it.

"What them? Am I to lose six hundred dollars pre annum, Jess for the satisfackshun o' his spite? Durned if I do, cost what it may!

"The thing 'd be as easy as tumblin' off o' a log. A half an hour's squatting amon the bushes beside this 're gleed, the pullin' o' a trigger, an' air done. Thar mout be a little bit o' haulin' an' hidin', but I kin eozy do the fust, an' the crlik 'll do the last. I know a pool clost by that's jest the very place for sech a concealmint.

"Who'd even suspect? Thar's nobody to know. Neery a soul but myself; an' I reckon thet 're secret 'u'd be safe enuf in this coon's keepin'."

For some time the old pirate stands silent, as if further reflecting on the dark scheme, and calculating the chances of success or discovery.

All at once an exclamation escapes him, that betokens a change of mind. Not that he has repented of his hellish design, only that some other plan promises better for its execution.

"Jerry Rook! Jerry Book!" he mutters, in apostrophe, to himself, "what the stupid hev ye been thinkin' o'! Ye've never yit split hewmin' blood, an' mustn't begin that game now. It mout lie like a log

upon y'ur soui; an' besides, it's jest possible somebody inot git to hear o't. 'The crack o' a rifle air a suspisius soun', at any time, but more espeeshuly i' the dead o' night, an' more so of thar shed chance ter be the gowl o' a wownded man comin' arter it. S'posin' he—that air Dick—wa'n't shot dead at the fust go. Durned ef I'd like ter foller it up—neery bit o' it. As things stan' thar need be no sech chances, ethyer o' fearin' or feelin'. A word to planter Brandon 'll be as good as six shots out o' the surest rifle. It's only to let him know Dick Tarleton's hyar, an' a direckshun 'beout whar he kin be foun'. He'll soon summons the others to 'sist him, in the same bizness they left unfinished, now God knows how many year ago. They'll make short work wi' him—no danger o' thar givin' him time to palaver 'beout *that*, or any thin' else, I reck'n. An' no danger to me. A hint 'll be enuf, 'ithout my appearin' among 'em—the very plan, by the Eternal!

"How's best for the hint ter be konveyed to 'em? Ha! I kin write—fortnite I got schoolin' enuf for this—a note to planter Brandon. The gurl kin take it over to the plantashun. She needn't be know'd, ethyer. She kin wrap up in her cloak, an' g'e it to some o' the niggers as 'll sure be 'beout the place outside. Thar's no need for a answer. I know what Brand'll do arter gittin' it.

"Thar's no time to be squandered away. By this, Dick hes got to the town. Thar's no tellin' how long he may stay thar, an' they must intercep' him on his way back. They kin be a-waitin' an' riddy, in that bit o' clearin', the very place for that purpiss—considerin' it's been tried already.

"Now there's not a minnit to be lost. I must into the shanty an' scrape off the letter."

Bent upon his devilish design, he hastens inside the house; as he enters, calling upon his daughter to come into the kitchen.

"Hyar, gurl! Ye've got some paper ye write y'ur lessons upon. Fetch me a sheet o't, along wi' a pen an' ink. Be quick 'beout it."

The young girl wonders what he can want with things so rarely used by him. But she is not accustomed to question him; and without saying a word, complies with the requisition.

The pen, inkstand and paper are placed on the rude slab stand, and Jerry Rook sits down before it, taking the first between his fingers.

After a few minutes spent in silent cogitation, reflecting on the form of his epistle, it is produced.

Badly spelled and rudely scrawled, but short and simple, it runs thus:

"To planter Brandin, esquire:

"Sir—I guess as how ye recollect a man by name Dick Tarleton, an' maybe ye won't be desirous o' seein' him. Ef ye be ye kin gratify y'ur desire. He air now at this present in the town o' Helena—the what part o' it I don't know. But I know whar he will be afore mornin': that air upon the road leadin' from the town to the settlements on White river. He ain't a gwine fur out, as he is travelin' afoot, an' he's sartain to keep the trace thro' the bit o' clarin', not fur from Caney crik. Ef you or anybody else wants to see him, that w'u'd be as good a place as thar is on the road.

"Y'urs at command,

"A STRANGER BUT A FR'EN'."

Jerry Rook has no fear that his handwriting will be recognized. So long since he has seen it, he would scarce know it himself.

Folding up the sheet and sealing it with some drops of resin melted in the dull flame of the dip, he directs it as inside: "To planter Brandin, esquire." Then handing it to his daughter, and instructing the young girl to deliver it *incog.*, he dispatches her upon her errand.

Lena, with her cloak folded closely around her fairy form, and hooded over her head, proceeds along the path leading to the Brandon plantation. Poor, simple child! Herself innocent as the forest fawn, she knows not that she is carrying in her hand the death-warrant of one who, although but little known, should yet be dear to her—Dick Tarleton, the father of Pierre Robideau!

She succeeds in delivering the letter, though failing to preserve her incognito. The hooded head proves but a poor disguise. The domestic who takes the epistles out of her hand, recognizes, by the white, outstretched arm and slender, symmetrical fingers, the daughter of "old Rook, de hunter dat live 'pon Caney crik." So reports he to his master, when questioned about the messenger who brought the anonymous epistle.

Known or unknown, the name is of slight significance. The withholding of it does not affect the action intended by the writer, nor frustrate his cruel scheme. As the morning sun strikes into the "bit o' clarin'," described in Jerry Rook's letter, it throws light upon a terrible tableau—the body of a man suspended from the branch of a tree.

It is upon the same branch where late hung the young hunter, Robideau. *It is the body of his father!*

There is no one near—no signs of life, save the buzzards still lingering around the bones of the bear, and the gaunt gray wolf that has shared with them their repast. But there are the footprints of many men, long scores across the turf that tell of violent struggling, and a patch of grass more smoothly trampled down beneath the gallows-tree. There stood Judge Lynch, surrounded by his jury and staff of executioners, while above them swung the victim of their vengeance. Once more had the travestie of a trial been enacted; once more condemnedon pronounced; and that tragedy, long postponed, was now played to the closing scene, the *dénouement* of death.

CHAPTER XIII.

SIX YEARS AFTER.

Six years have elapsed since the lynching of Dick Tarleton. Six years, by the statute of limitations will wipe out a pecuniary debt, and make dim many a reminiscence. But there are remembrances not so easily effaced; and one of these was the tragedy enacted in the clearing near Caney creek.

And yet it was but little remembered. In a land where everyday life chronicles some lawless deed, the mere murder of a man is but a slight circumstance—scarce extending to the proverbial "nine days' wonder." Richard Tarleton was but a "sportsman," a gambler, if not worse; and as to the mode of his execution, several others of the same fraternity were treated in like fashion not long after, having been hanged in the streets of Vicksburg, the most respectable citizens of the place acting as their executioners!

Amidst these, and other like reminiscences, the circumstances of Dick Tarleton's death soon ceased to be talked about or even thought of, except, perhaps, by certain individuals who had played a part in the illegal execution.

But some of these were dead, some gone away from the neighborhood; while the influx of colonizing strangers, creating a thicker population in the place, had caused those changes that tend to destroy the souvenirs of early times, and obliterate the memories of many a local legend.

There was one memory that remained fresh—one souvenir that never slept, in the minds of certain individuals who still lived in Helena or its neighborhood. It was of other tragic occurrences that had taken place in the clearing near Caney creek, on the day before that on which the condemned gambler had been dispatched into eternity.

The knowledge of this second tragedy had been confided only to a few; and beyond this few it had not extended. The disappearance of young Robideau, sudden as it had been, excited scarce any curiosity—less on account of the other and better-known event, that for the time occupied the attention of all.

The boy, as if feeling the taint of his Indian blood, and conscious of a distinction that in some way humiliated him, had never mixed much with the youth of the surrounding settlements, and for this reason his absence scarce elicited remark.

Those who chanced to make this inquiry were told that Jerry Rook had sent him back to his mother's people, who were half-breed Choctaw Indians, located on the western border of Arkansas Territory, on lands lately assigned to them by act of Congress.

The explanation was of course satisfactory; and to most people in Helena and its neighborhood, the boy Robideau was as if he had never been.

There were some, however, who had better reason to remember him, as also to disbelieve this specious tale of Jerry Rook, though careful never to contradict it. These were the six youths, now grown to be men, the heroes of that wild, wicked frolic already recorded.

In their minds, the remembrance of that fatal frolic was as vivid as ever; having been periodically refreshed by an annual disbursement of a hundred dollars each.

With the exacting spirit of a Shylock, Jerry Rook had continued to hold them to their contract; and if at any time remonstrance was made, it was soon silenced by his pointing to an oblong mound of earth, rudely resembling a grave, under that tree where he had held his last conversation with his friend, Dick Tarleton.

The inference was, that the remains of Pierre Robideau were deposited beneath that sod, and could at any time be disinterred to give damning evidence of his death.

Remonstrance was rarely made. Most of the contributors to Jerry Rook's income had become masters of their own substance. Still, the compulsory payment of a hundred dollars each, was like the annual drawing of a tooth; all the more painful from the reflection of what it was for, and the knowledge that, as long as their creditor lived, there was no chance of escaping it.

Painful as it was, however, they continued to pay it more punctually than they would have done had it been a debt recoverable by court, or an obligation of honor.

They were not all equally patient under the screw thus periodically put upon them. There were two more especially inclined to kick out of the terrible traces that chafed them. These were Bill Buck, the son of the horse-dealer, and Slaughter, who kept the Helena tavern—his father being defunct. Neither had greatly prospered in the world; and to both the sum of a hundred dollars a year was a tax worth considering.

In their conversation with one another, they had discussed this question, and more than once had been heard to hint at some dark design by which the impost might be removed.

These hints were only made in presence of their partners in the secret compact, and never within ear-shot of Jerry Rook.

It is true they were discouraged by the others, less harassed by the tax, and therefore less tempted to take any sinister step toward removing it. They had enough to torment them already.

Both Buck and Slaughter were capable of committing crime, even deeper than that already on their conscience. Six years had not changed them for the better. On the contrary, they had become worse, both being distinguished as among the most dissolute members of the community.

A similar account might be given of the other four; though these, figuring in positions of greater responsibility, kept their characters a little better disguised. Two of their fathers were also dead—Randall, the

judge, and Spencer, the Episcopalian clergyman; while their sons, less respected than they, were not likely to succeed to their places.

Brandon's father still lived; though drink was fast carrying him to the grave; and his son was congratulating himself on the proximity of an event that would make him sole master of himself, as also of a cotton plantation.

The storekeeper, Grubbs, had gone, no one knew whither—not even the sheriff, loth to let him depart—leaving his son to build up a new fortune extracted out of the pockets of the Mississippi boatmen. The horse-dealer still stuck to his old courses, coping, swapping, swearing—likely to outlive them all.

Among the many changes, observable in the settlements around Helena—there was none more remarkable than that which had taken place in the fortunes of Jerry Rook. It was a complete transformation—alike mysterious; for no one could tell how it came, or whence the power that had produced it. It appeared not only in the person of Jerry himself, but in everything that appertained to him—his house, his grounds, his dogs and his daughter—in short, all his belongings.

An old hunter, no longer clad in dirty buck-skin, and dwelling in a hovel; but a respectable-looking citizen of the semi-planter type, habited in decent broadcloth, wearing clean linen, living in a neat frame house surrounded by fenced fields, and kept by black domestics!

The old scarred dog was no more to be seen; but in his place some three or four hounds, lounging lazily about, and looking as if they had plenty to eat and nothing to do.

But in the personnel of the establishment there was, perhaps, no transformation more striking than that which had taken place in Jerry Rook's daughter. There was no change in her beauty. That was still the same, only more womanly, more developed. But the sun-tanned, barefoot girl, in loose, homespun frock, with unkempt hair sweeping over her shoulders, was now, six years after, scarce recognizable in the young lady in white muslin dress, fine thread stockings, and tresses plaited, perfumed, and kept from straying by the teeth of a tortoise-shell comb.

And this was Lena Rook, lovely as ever, and more than ever the theme of man's admiration.

Despite all this—despite her father's prosperity, and the comfort, almost luxury, surrounding her, few failed to remark an expression of melancholy constantly pervading her countenance; though none could tell its cause.

Some dread souvenir must have become fixed in the mind of that young girl—some dark cloud had descended over her heart, perhaps to shadow it forever!

CHAPTER XIV.

STEALING UPON A SHANTY.

The breath of autumn had blown over the woods of Arkansas; and the first frosts of November, followed by the beautiful Indian summer, had imparted to the foliage those rich tints of red and gold known only to the forests of America.

The squirrel down among the dead leaves, actively engaged in garnering its winter stores, scarce heeds the footsteps of the hunter heard near by and among the trees.

There was one, making his way through the woods at no great distance from the dwelling of Jerry Rook. He was approaching from the west, with his face in the direction of the house. But although he carried a gun, and was not traveling upon either trace or path, he did not appear to be in pursuit of game. Squirrels scampered off before him, unmolested; and, once or twice, turkeys ran across his track, without tempting him to draw trigger, or even take the gun from his shoulder.

In appearance he would scarce have passed for a hunter, nor was he dressed after this fashion. His costume was more that of a traveler; moreover, he had just come from a stand some three miles back, where he had left a horse, and a pair of well-filled saddle-bags.

The "stand," a solitary tavern, was not far from the crossing of White river, on the road leading from Little Rock to the settlements on the Mississippi. He had approached the tavern from the west, as if coming from the former, and now, on foot, he was still advancing eastward; though not along the road, which ran through the forest at some distance to his right, screened from view by thick timber standing between.

By the dust still clinging to his garments, he appeared to have come a long way. It was gradually getting brushed off by the leaves of the underwood and the thick canebrakes through which he was compelled to pass.

Why was he avoiding the road? Was he a stranger, who had taken the wrong fork, that had conducted him to a blind trace now run out? No; it could not be that. The main road was not to be mistaken. Besides, he had left it at right angles after getting out of sight of the stand, and had since been keeping parallel to it, as if acquainted with its direction. If a stranger, he was evidently one who had been over the ground before.

He had the appearance of being twenty-five years of age; with a complexion naturally dark, still further shaded either by exposure to a tropical sun or by a protracted spell of traveling. His hair was jetty black and bushy; his upper lip bearded, with a dark, well-defined whisker on either cheek. The chin was close-shaven, showing a protrusion indicative of great firmness; while the profile was of true Roman type. His eyes were dark, lustrous, and piercing. In stature he was full six feet, with a figure of fine proportions, knit as if for strength. Its activity was displayed by his light, lithe step, as he made his way through the tangle of trees.

As already stated, the dress was not that of a bus-

der, either amateur or professional. The coat was of broadcloth, dark-colored and of good quality, cut frock-fashion. It was worn buttoned, though showing underneath a vest of Marsala, with striped shirt bosom and sparkling breast-pin. The hat was of the kind known as gray felt. This, with green-baize "wrappers" around the legs, showing the chafe of the stirrup-leather, gave the costume somewhat of the character of a traveler's. The jaded horse and heavy saddle-bags, the tanned complexion and thick coating of dust over all, had told the tavern people, as he reined up, of a long road left behind him—perhaps from the far prairies.

The keeper of the lone hostelry had thought it strange—his starting off the moment his horse was stabled. But the horse and saddle-bags were earnest of his coming back; and Boniface had continued to chew his quid without being inquisitive.

As the young man threaded his way through the trees, it was evident he was not straying. His face was continually in one direction; while his glances, directed forward, seemed to reach for some object expected to appear before him.

All at once he made a stop, at sight of a "break" among the trees. It indicated a tract of open ground or clearing, that extended athwart the path he was pursuing. He seemed surprised at this; and glanced quickly to the right and left, as if to assure himself that he had been going right.

"Yes," he muttered, apparently satisfied on this head. "Right before me is the spot—the creek and the cabin. I can't be mistaken. These old trees I remember well—every one of them. But there's a clearing now—perhaps a plantation, and the old shanty gone altogether."

Without finishing the reflection, he kept onward, though slowly and with great caution—increasing as he drew nearer to the open ground. He appeared to approach it stealthily, step by step, as if stalking a herd of deer.

He was soon on the edge of the opening, though still under cover of thick woods. A stream made the line of demarcation between them.

On its opposite side, about twenty yards from the bank, he saw a neat frame house, with a spacious porch in front, and surrounded by fields. There were outbuildings at the back, with sheds and corn-cribs; while in front a fenced inclosure, half-garden, half-orchard, extended down to the stream, which formed its bottom boundary.

Just opposite this inclosure the stranger had stopped, the moment he caught sight of the house.

"As I anticipated," he muttered to himself—"changed; everything changed! The cabin cleared away, and the trees. Jerry Rook gone, perhaps dead—some stranger in his place; and she gone, too—grown up—and—"

A choking sigh forbade the pronunciation of some word that struggled for utterance—the expression of some painful thought, made manifest by the dark shadow that swept across the countenance of the speaker.

"Oh! what an unfortunate fate. Fool that I was, to go and leave her. Fool, to have listened to the counsels of her wicked father. When I learnt what he had done, I should have come back, if not for love, for revenge. It may not be too late for the last; but for the first—oh, God! the girl I have loved for long years; to come back and find her—perhaps in the arms of another. Oh, God!"

For some moments the young man stood with clouded face, his strong frame quivering under the shock of some painful emotion.

"Shall I cross over and make inquiry?" was the reflection that followed, as he became calmer. The people can, no doubt, give me some information whether he be dead, and if she be still in the neighborhood. No—no; I will not ask. I dread the answer to be given me.

"But why not? I may as well know now the worst, whatever it be. I must learn it in time. Why not at once?

"There is no danger of my being recognized. Even she would not know me; and these people are perhaps strangers to the settlement. The country shows a change—clearings everywhere around, where I remember only trees. I wonder who they are? Some of them should soon come out of that door. The day is inviting. I shall hold back awhile and see."

During all this time the young man had been standing among thick underwood that screened his person from sight. He only changed his position, so that his face should be also invisible to any one upon the other side of the creek, and thus stood, with eyes fixed intently upon the house.

He had not been many minutes in this attitude of expectation, when the front door, which stood open, was filled by a form, the sight of which sent the blood in a lava current through his veins, and caused his heart to bound audibly in his breast.

The apparition that had produced this effect was a young girl—a lady, she might be called—in light, summer dress, with a white kerchief thrown loosely over her head, only partially concealing the thick coil of shining hair, held by the tortoise-shell comb, underneath it.

Standing on the step of the door, with the dark background behind her, she appeared like some fair portrait suddenly set in its frame.

Changed as she was since he had last seen her—a young girl in coarse, copperas-dyed gown of home-spun stuff—bareheaded, stockingless and shoeless—he who stood among the trees might not so readily have recognized her had he met her elsewhere. But there upon that spot—where stood the old cabin, under whose roof he had lived and loved—loved her—recognition came at the first glance. He knew the fair vision before him was Lena Rook, still living—still lovely as ever!

CHAPTER XV.

LOVE'S RECOGNITION.

The first impulse of the young man was to spring forth from his ambush, leap over the creek—a mere rivulet—and rush into the presence of the fair creature who had shown herself in the doorway.

He was restrained by a crowd of thoughts, that came surging up at that moment—doubts and memories, both painful. Her father might be still alive and inside the house. The stranger had serious reasons for not wishing to see him. Or, he might be dead, and she now under the control of another!

The last thought was agonizing; and he gazed intently upon the young girl, as if searching for some sign that would release him from the torture of suspense. Scarce twenty yards from where she stood, he could see the sparkle of jewelry upon the fingers of her left hand. Did one of them carry that thin circlet of gold to show that she was lost to him forever?

His glance, instinctively directed to her hand, now traced the contour of her person, and once more mounted to her face. Form and features were alike scrutinized—the color in her cheeks—the expression in her eyes—the air that pervaded all. It was that of one still single, whose fresh, virginal charms had not given place to the staid demeanor produced by the solicitudes of wedded life. It pleased him to fancy so.

He too noted the melancholy air, and wondered at its meaning.

There was much, besides, to wonder at, in the changes that had taken place. How had Jerry Rook, the poor white, become a proprietor? He must be so, if the house were his. And if not, then back again came the painful thought, that it—and she, too—might be the property of another.

What had he best do? Retire without showing himself, and seek information elsewhere? Some one living near, who could tell him all. Or, he might learn what he wanted from the landlord of the tavern, where he had stopped. Should be return to it, and stay till circumstances favored him with an *éclaircissement*?

Why not have it at once, and from her? Maid or married, she would not be likely to remember him. A skin changed from the soft smoothness of boyhood's day—a complexion deeply bronzed—the downy cheek and lips now roughly bearded—stature increased by at least six inches, and a dress altogether different from that in which she had been accustomed to see him.

"No, she will not recognize me," muttered the young man, as he completed this self-examination. "I will go round by the gate, make some excuse for a call, get into conversation with her and then—"

He was about turning to make the circuit unobserved, when he saw that she had stepped out of the porch, and was coming toward the creek. It was for this that the kerchief had been spread over her crown, as a shade against the sun.

He could not safely retreat without having his ambush discovered. He resolved to keep his place.

She came on down the walk, and turned in among the trees of the orchard. Most of them were peach trees, laden with their luscious fruit, now ripe and falling. The ground was strewn with the golden globes, affording food to the honey-bee and hornet.

She was now out of his sight, or seen only at intervals, her white dress gleaming through the leaves, as she moved through the orchard.

The young man was thinking how he might present himself without seeming rude, when, all at once, a cry came from the lips of the young lady. It was a short, sharp exclamation, apparently called forth by some impending danger. It seemed a sufficient apology for intruding.

Accepting it as such, the stranger sprung across the creek and rushed into the orchard.

In a few seconds he stood confronting the girl, who had turned toward the house.

"I heard you cry out," he said. "Was there any danger, may I ask—"

But before he had finished the interrogatory, he saw what had elicited the exclamation. A large snake lay coiled under one of the trees.

It had been feasting on the fallen fruit, and, nearly trodden upon, had thrown itself into the defensive attitude. The "skirt" caused by the vibration of its tail told it to be a rattlesnake.

Without inquiring further, he raised his rifle, and sent a bullet through his head. Its coils flew out, and, after struggling a few seconds on the grass, the reptile lay dead.

"Thanks," said the lady, as soon as she had recovered from her surprise. "I came near setting my foot upon it; and perhaps would have done so, if I'd not heard the rattle. You're a good shot, sir; you've killed it outright."

"I've had a deal of practice, *miss*," he replied, laying a marked emphasis on the last word.

His heart thrilled audibly as he awaited the rejoinder. Would she accept the title, or correct it?

He had already glanced at her left hand, holding a peach she had plucked. There were rings; but among them he saw not the plain circlet nor its keeper. Their absence inspired him with hope.

"One can easily see that," she rejoined. "Besides, I am not unacquainted with the ways of the woods. My father is a hunter, or *was*."

"You say '*was*', *miss*. Is your father still living?"

This question was asked with a double design. Would she still permit herself to be called "*miss*?" Was Jerry Rook the owner of the pretty house that had supplied his rude shelter?

"My father living! Certainly, sir. But he does not go hunting any more—or only at times. He has enough to keep him occupied about home—clearing the ground and planting the crops."

"Is he at home now?"

"To-day, no. He has ridden over to Helena. I expect he will be back soon. Do you wish to see him, sir?—you have some business, perhaps?"

"No—no. I was merely wandering through the woods—squirrel shooting. I had strayed to the other side of the creek, when I heard your cry."

"It was very kind of you to come to my assistance," said the young girl, giving the stranger a glance, in which she did not fail to note his graceful bearing. Then, observing the dust upon his garments, she added: "If I mistake not, you're a stranger to this part of the country?"

"I once knew it well, and especially around this place."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. If I remember right, there was a cabin here—upon the very spot on which your house is now standing. It was inhabited by an old hunter of the name of Rook—Jeremiah, or Jerry, Rook."

"That is my father's name."

"Then it must have been he. What a change! It was all standing timber around—scarce an acre of clearing."

"That is true. It is only lately that my father bought the land, and cleared it. We are better off than we were then."

"Has your father any family beside yourself—a son, or *son-in-law*?"

"Not any, sir," replied the young girl, turning upon the questioner a look of some surprise. "I am the only one—his only daughter. Why do you ask?"

"I thought I remembered—or had heard—something—"

"Heard what, sir?" asked she, cutting short the stammering speech.

"—Of a young man—a boy, rather—who lived in your father's cabin. Was he not your brother?"

"I never had one, sir. He you speak of was no relative to us."

"There was some one, then?"

"Yes. He is gone away—gone years ago."

The serious tone in which these words were spoken—something like a sigh which accompanied, with a shadow that made its appearance on the face of the speaker, were signs pleasing to the interrogator. His heart beat joyfully as he put upon them his own interpretation.

Before he could question further, the young girl, as if stirred by a sudden thought, looked inquiringly in his face.

"You say you knew this place well, sir. When did you leave it? Was it a long time ago?"

"Not so long, either; but, alas! long enough for you to have forgotten me, Lena!"

"Pierre—it is you!"

CHAPTER XVI.

ABSENCE EXPLAINED.

It was Pierre Robideau who stood once more in the presence of Lena Rook. Not in her presence alone; for they were locked in each other's embrace.

From the first moment of seeing him, the young girl had felt strange thoughts stealing over her—strange memories awakened by that manly presence that scarce seemed unknown to her.

She knew that Pierre Robideau still lived; and that her father had compelled her to keep it a secret. But why, she knew not; nor why her father had sent him away. It was well she knew not this.

Equally ignorant had she been kept as to where he had gone. California, her father told her, and this was indeed true. But what knew she of California? Nothing beyond the fact of its being a far-distant land, where people went to gather gold. This much was known to every one in the settlements around—every one in America.

Lena Rook thought not of the gold; she thought only of her old playmate, and wondered why he was staying so long away.

Was he never going to return? He who had won her girl's heart—the firstlings of her young love—had stood under the forest tree, clasping her in his arms, and telling her she had won his!

And on that dread night when he lay upon the couch, slowly recovering from the dreadful strangulation, was not the first word breathed forth from his lips her own name, Lena?

And to have gone away, and staid away, and forgotten all this!

It was not strange that she wondered—not strange that she grieved; or that the cloud of melancholy, already remarked upon, sat almost continually on her countenance,

She had not forgotten him—not for a single day. Throughout the long, lonely years, there was scarce an hour in which she did not think, though not permitted to speak of him. She had been true to him, both in heart and hand—true against scores of solicitations, including that of Alfred Brandon, who was now seeking her hand in marriage, determined upon obtaining it.

But she had resisted his suit, even braving the displeasure of her father, who was backing it.

And all for the memory of one who had gone away without explaining the cause of his departure, or making promise to return.

Often had she thought of him, and with bitterness; and at times, too, with a feeling akin to spite.

But now, with Pierre once more in her presence, his tall, graceful form before her eyes, she instantly forgot all, and threw herself sobbing upon his breast.

There was no reservation in the act; no pretense or prudery. Love's instinct told her he was still loyal; and the firm, fervent pressure of his arms, as he received her in that sweet embrace, confirmed it.

For some time both remained silent, their hearts too happy for speech.

At length it returned to them, Lena taking the initiative.

"But tell me, Pierre, why did you stay from me, and for such a time?"

"Your question is easily answered, Lena. I have made a long journey, to begin with. I have been to California, and spent some time there, in searching for gold. But that is not altogether what delayed me. I was for three years a prisoner among the Arapahoes."

"Arapahoes—what are they?"

"A tribe of Indians, who roam over the big prairie. I might have been still in their hands but for a party of Choctaws—my mother's people, you know—who chanced to come among the Arapahoes. They rescued me by paying a ransom, and brought me back with them to the Choctaw country, west of here, whence I have just come, almost direct."

"Pierre! I am so happy you are here again! And you have grown so big, and so beautiful. But you were always beautiful, Pierre. And you have been to California. I heard that. But tell me: why did you go there at all?"

"I went to find my father," he answered, in a grave tone.

"Your father! But he—"

The young girl checked herself at the thought of a fearful incident that only now rose to her remembrance—another episode of that night of horrors.

She repented of her speech; for she believed that Pierre knew nothing of what had then occurred. He had not been told, either by her father or herself, that Dick Tarleton had been there, as he was still in an unconscious state when the latter left the cabin, never more to return to it.

She had said nothing of it to Pierre after his recovery. Her father had cautioned her against any communication with him on the subject; and, indeed, there was not much chance; for the moment he was in a condition to travel, the old hunter had hurried him off—going in the dead of night, and taking the youth along with him.

Remembering all this, Lena regretted the speech half-commenced, and was thinking how she should change to some other subject, when Pierre, interrupting, relieved her from her embarrassment.

"You need not tell me, Lena," said he, his voice trembling. "I know the sad tale—all of it. Perhaps more than you; though it was later that I learned of it. My sweet innocent! you little dreamt when—but no—I must not. Let us talk no more of those times, but only of the present. And now, Lena, *I do not wish to see your father*, nor do I want him to know that I am in the neighborhood. Therefore you must not say you have seen me."

"I will not," answered she, in a tone that spoke more of sorrow than surprise. "Alas! it is too easy to obey your request; for I dare not even speak of you to him. My father, I know not for what reason, has forbidden me to mention your name. If, by chance, I ever asked after you, or spoke of your coming back, it was only to get scolded. Will you believe it, Pierre, he once told me you were dead! But, I grieved so, he afterward repented, and said he had only done it to try me! God forgive me for speaking so of my own father; but, I almost fancied, at times, that he wished it himself. Oh, Pierre! what have you ever done to make him your enemy?"

"I cannot tell. That is a mystery to me; and so, too, his sending me away, and so, too, several other things; but—Whose voice is that?"

"My father's! And the tramp of his horse! He is coming along the lane. Oh, Pierre! you mustn't let him see you!"

"Now shall he. I can get off as I came, under cover of the trees. Adieu, dearest. Meet me tomorrow night. Come out late, when all are gone to bed—say eleven. You'll find me waiting for you here—by the big cottonwood yonder. How often we used to sit under its shadow!"

"Go, Pierre, go! He's got up to the gate!"

"One more kiss, love, and then—"

Their lips met, and parted; and they too parted—the girl gliding toward the house, and the young man stealing off among the peach-trees, to seek safer concealment in the shadowy woods beyond.

CHAPTER XVII.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

"I've got good news for ye, gurl," said Jerry Rook, sliding out of his saddle, and joining his daughter in the porch. "Darnation good news."

"What news, father?"

"Thee liquor hez at last done its work, an' ole planter Brandon air dead."

"Oh, father! Surely you do not call it good news?"

"An' shurely I do—the best o' news. Alf air now full master o' the place, an' that's nothin' to hinder you from bein' full mistress o' t'. I know he intends makin' you a offer o' marriage, an' I've reezun to b'lieve it'll be dud this very day. Brandon war buried day afore yesterday."

"If he does, father, I shall refuse him."

"Refuse him!" cried the quondam squatter, half starting out of the chair in which he had just seated himself. "Lena, gurl! hev ye tak leave o' yur senses? Air ye inairnest?"

"I am, father. I mean what I've said."

"Mean darnation! Ye're eyther mad, gurl, or else talkin' like a chile. D'y'e know what refusin' means?"

"I have not thought of it."

"But I hev, over an' over ag'in. It means beggary—perhaps starvation, for myself as well as you."

"I'd rather starve than marry Alf Brandon."

"Ye w'u'd, w'u'd ye? Then ye may hev a chance o't, sooner 'n ye think for. Ye've got a idea yur ole dad's well to do; an' so think a good many other folks. Thar's been a house built, an' a clarin' made; but neyther's been paid for. Jerry Rook don't know the day he may hev to up sticks, an' go back ag'in to some durned old crib o' a cabin."

"Father, I was as happy in our old cabin as I've ever been in this fine house—ay, far happier."

"Ye war, war ye? But I warn't—not by a long chalk; an' I don't want to squat in any o' yer shanties ag'in—not ef I kin keep out o' em. Hyar's a plan by which *you* may be rich for the rest o' yer life; an' there'd be no need for me sturvin', eyther. Alf Brandon kums in fur a good plantation, wi' three-score niggers on it; an' there's nothin' to hinder you from bein' mistress o' the hul lot."

"I don't wish it."

"But I do, an' I mean to hev it so. Don't git it in yur head, good-lookin' as you may think y'rself, that the world air a stick o' sugar candy, and y'e've got nothin' to do but suck it. I tell you, gurl, I've drifted into diffeequities. I've had somes rassources you know nothin' 'beout; but I can't tell the day *the supplies may be stop*, an' then we've got to go under. Now, d'y'e unsterman' me?"

"Indeed, father, I know nothing of your affairs. How should I? But I am sure I could never be happy as the wife of Alfred Brandon."

"An' why? What hev ye ag'in' him? He's a good-lookin' feller—dog-goned good-lookin'!"

"It has nothin' to do with his looks."

"What then? His karracktur, I s'pose?"

"You know it is not good."

"Durn karracktur! What signify that? Ef all the young weemen in these parts war to wait till they got a husband o' good karracktur, they'd stay a long spell single, I reck'n. Alf Brandon ain't no worse nor other people; an' what's o' far more consequence, he air richer than most. Ye'd be a fool, gurl—a dotted eedyit, not to jump at the chance. An' don't you git into yur head that I'm a-gwine to let it slip. Willin' or not, y'e've got to be the wife o' Alf Brandon. Refuse, an' by the Eternal, ye shall be no longer my darlin'! You hear that?"

"I hear you, father. It is very painful to hear you. And painful, too, for me to tell you, that your threat can not change me. I'm sure I have been obedient to you in every thing else. Why should you force me to this?"

"Wal," said the hardened man, apparently relenting, "I acknowledge ye've been a good gurl; but why shed you now spile all the chances o' our gettin' a good livin' by yur obstinateness in this business? I tell ye that my affairs air, jest at this time, a little precarious. I owe Alf Brandon money—a good grist o't—an' now his father's dead, he may be on me for't. Besides, you're o' full age, an' oughter be spliced to somebody. Who's better'n Alf Brandon?"

Had Jerry Rook arrived a little sooner at the house, or approached it with greater caution, he might have received a more satisfactory answer to his question. As it was, he got none—his daughter remaining silent, as if not caring to venture a reply.

She had averted her eyes, displaying some slight embarrassment. Something of this the old man must have noticed, as evinced by the remark that followed.

"Poor white ye ain't a-gwine to marry wi' my consent, I don't care what be his karracktur; an' ef ye've been makin' a fool o' yerself wi' sech, and g'in any promise, ye've got to git out o' it the best way ye kin."

Neither was there any rejoinder to this; and he sat for a time in silence, as if reflecting on the probability of some such complication.

He had never heard of his daughter having bestowed her heart on any one; and indeed she had gained some celebrity for having so long kept it to herself.

For all that, it might have been secretly surrendered; and this would perhaps account for his aversion to the man he most wished her to marry.

"I heerd a shot as I war coming along the road. It war the crack o'a rifle; and sounded as if it war somewhat near the house. Has anybody been hyar?"

The question was but a corollary to the train of thought he had been pursuing.

Fortunately for the young girl, it admitted of an evasive answer, under the circumstances excusable.

"There has been no one at the house since you left. There was a shot, though; I heard it myself."

"Where away?"

"I think, down by the creek—maybe in the woods beyond the orchard."

"That ain't nothin' in them woods 'ceptin' squirls. Who's been squirl' shootin' this time o' day?"

"Some boys, perhaps."

"Boys—Hey! what's that dog a-draggin' out from 'mong the peach trees? Snake, by the Eternal! An' a rattler, too! The hound hasn't killed that varmint himself!"

The old hunter, yielding to curiosity, or some undivided impulse, stepped down from the porch, and out to where the hound had come to a stop, and was standing by the body of the snake.

Driving the dog aside, he stooped over the dead reptile to examine it.

"Shot through the skull!" he muttered to himself, "an' wi' a rifle, o' sixty to the pound. Thet 're'e's been a hunter's gun. Who ked he be? It's been done this side o' the crick, too, seein' as the dog hasn't wetted a hair in fetchin' o't."

Turning along the trail of the snake—which, to his experienced eye, was discernible in the grass—he followed it till he came to the spot where the reptile had been killed.

"Shot hyar, for sartin. Yes; that's the score o' the bullet arter it had passed through the varmint's brainpan; an' that's the shoe-tracks o' him as fired the shot. No boy that; but a full-grown man! Who the duration hez been trespassin' 'mong my peach-trees?"

He bent over the tracks and carefully scrutinized them. Then rising erect, he followed them to the bank of the creek, where he saw the same footprints more conspicuously outlined in the mud.

"Strenger, for sartin!" muttered he; "no sech fatmark as that 'beout these settlements—not as I knows on. Who the duration kin it a' been?"

It was strange he should take so much trouble about a circumstance so slight, or shew so much anxiety to discover who had been the intruder. He was evidently uneasy about something of more importance to him than the trespass among his peach trees.

"That gurl must a' heerd the shot plainer than she's been tellin' me o'; an' see'd more'n she's confessed to. Thar's somethin' on her mind I hain't been able to make out, nohow. She shall be put through a chapter o' kattykism."

"Lena, gurl!" he continued, going back toward the porch, still occupied by his daughter; "d'y'e mean to say ye see'd nobody 'beout hyar to-day?"

"I see some one now," said she, by the rarest bit of good luck enabled to evade giving an answer to the question.

"See some one now. Whar?"

"There. A friend of yours coming along the lane."

"Alf Brandon!" exclaimed the old hunter, hurrying forth to receive the individual thus announced; and who, astride a sleek horse, was seen riding leisurely in the direction of the house.

For Lena Rook it was an opportune arrival; and, for a time at least, she was spared that threatened "chapter o' kattykism."

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ANGRY ADMIRE.

For the first time in her life, Lena Rook saw Alfred Brandon approach her father's house without a feeling of pain, or repulsion.

Though for years he had been the most solicitous of her suitors, she felt for him something more than contempt. Despite his position in society, far superior to her own—despite his fine clothes and speeches, she saw through the character of the man, and believed him to be both a pretender and a poltroon.

She knew that he was cruel—a tyrant to all who had the misfortune to be under him, and a hard taskmaster to the black-skinned slaves that toiled upon his father's plantation.

Though dissipated, he was not generous; and, with all the plenty he possessed, he was accounted among his associates the closest of screws. He spent money, and enough of it, but only upon himself, and in the indulgence of his own sensual desires.

He had obtained the reputation of being one of the meanest fellows in the neighborhood to which he belonged; and Lena Rook knew it.

She had never liked him as a boy; and her aversion was increased by her knowledge that, as a boy, he had been the bitter enemy of Pierre Robideau.

She did not think how much this hostility was due to herself; for, from an early period, the son of the planter had been bitterly jealous of her playmate and companion.

But she remembered the scene in the glade; she remembered that Alf Brandon had been the chief instigator; and she had, all along, suspected that Pierre's absence was in some way due to what had that day transpired.

She was pleased to see Brandon now, only because he had rescued her from a position that promised to become embarrassing. What answer could she have made to that question her father had asked? The opportune arrival had relieved her from agony of apprehension.

The planter—now that his father was dead, no longer the planter's son—seemed a little surprised at the pleased look with which she received him. She was not accustomed to give him such gracious receptions, and he little dreamt of its cause.

"No doubt," reasoned he, with a feeling of self-gratulation, "she's heard I'm now my own master, and won't much object to my becoming hers. A planter in his own right is a very different individual from a planter expectant; and Miss Lena Rook will have the sense to see it. I don't think there will be much difficulty about the thing. She's been only pretending with me in the past. Now that she sees all's ready, I guess she'll not stand shilly-shally any longer. So here goes for the proposal."

This string of reflections was made after Alfred Brandon had entered the gate, and was making his way toward the porch in which the young lady was still standing. They were finished as he set foot on the step.

There was no one to interfere with the conversation that came after. Jerry Rook, suspecting the purport of the planter's visit, had stayed behind to "hitch up" his horse; and afterward found excuse to stray to the back of the house, leaving the two alone.

"I suppose you have heard of my affliction, Miss Rook?" said Brandon, after salutations had been exchanged.

"My father has just been telling me of it."

"Ah! yes, my old dad's dead and gone. Buried him day before yesterday. Can't be helped, you know. It's the way of us all. We've all got to die."

To this lugubrious declaration Lena Rook yielded ready assent.

There was a pause in the conversation. Notwithstanding his plenitude of power, tending to inspire him with sufficient assurance, the suitor felt ill at ease. It was not to be wondered at, considering the errand on which he had come.

Moreover, the pleasant look had forsaken Lena's face, and he had begun to doubt of success.

She knew what he had come for, and was seriously reflecting on the answer she should give him.

She of course intended it to be negative; but she remembered her father's words, and was thinking in what way she might reject the disagreeable suitor without stirring up his spite. She so well understood

his nature as to know that he would be contemptible enough to use it.

It was no thought of herself that dictated the affinity with which she was entertaining him; though she could scarce conceal her disgust for the man before her, talking in such strain of a father so recently deceased.

She too had a father who was not what he ought to be. And she knew it. But still was he her father.

After remaining for some time silent, not knowing what to say—Brandon at length summoned sufficient courage to stammer out his purpose. It was done with some fear and trembling.

He was more himself after he had received the refusal; which was given in as delicate terms as the young lady could command.

But delicacy was thrown away upon the spiteful planter, who, stung by the thought of being refused by the daughter of a "poor white,"—he knew the secret of Jerry Rook's altered circumstances—began upbraiding, in terms of opprobrious wrath, the woman from whose feet he had just arisen!

The young girl, thus grossly outraged, would have called to her father for protection; but again remembering his words, she remained silent under the infliction—not even making an answer to her cowardly insulter.

"Somebody else, I suppose," said the rejected gentleman, spitefully pronouncing the words, "some poor 'trash' of your own sort has got a hold of you! By—!" the ruffian swore a frightful oath—"if it be so, when I find out who it is, and I don't care who it is, I'll make these settlements too hot to hold him. *Lena Rook, you'll rue this refusal!*"

Not a word said Lena Rook in reply to the coarse invective. A disdainful curl upon her lip was all the answer she vouchsafed, which stayed there as she stood watching him along the walk, and until he had remounted his horse and galloped off from the gate.

Hers were not the only eyes bent upon the disappointed suitor. Jerry Rook, engaged among the pigs and poultry, saw him ride away; and from the spiteful spurring of his horse, and the reckless air with which he rode, the old hunter conjectured the sort of answer that had been given him.

"Durn the gurl!" muttered he, as a black shadow swept across his wrinkled brow, "she's played fool an' refused him! Looks as ef she'd sassed him! Never mind, Alf Brandon! I'll make it all right for you. This chile ain't a-gwine to let that fine plantation o' yours slip through his fingers—not ef he know it. You shall hev the gurl, an' she you, ef I hev myself to drag her up to the halter. So then, my Lena lass, when I've done gi'n these hogs that corn, I'm a-gwine to read you a lectur'!"

In the abrupt departure of Brandon there was yet another pair watching it that became suffused with joy. They were the eyes of Pierre Robideau.

After parting from the sweetheart so long separated from him, the young man had recrossed the creek, and as he had intended, kept on through the woods toward the stand where he had left his horse.

Before going far the thought occurred to him that he might as well have a look at the quondam squatter, and see if he, too, was changed, like everything else.

It was only to place himself in the ambush that had already proved so serviceable to his purposes, and stay there till Jerry should show himself.

Knowing that the "porch" of a backwoods dwelling usually supplies the place of sitting-room, he did not anticipate any severe trial of patience.

It was not the gratification of mere curiosity that tempted him to return. He had other reasons that rendered him desirous to look upon his host of former days, at the same time that he was equally desirous not to let that host see him.

Nor was it exactly a desire that counseled him to this act; but a sort of involuntary impulse, such as the bird feels to approach the serpent that would destroy it.

Pierre Robideau had returned from California better informed about the doings of Jerry Rook than he had been on going out there. It was the old hunter that had induced him to undertake that distant journey. He had counseled, almost compelled, him to it, by a false story that his father had gone there before him, and had intrusted Jerry to send him after in all haste. For this purpose his former host had furnished the outfit and directions, and had even seen him some distance on his way.

As already stated, the unsuspecting youth, before starting, knew nothing of what occurred that night in the glade—not even that, while he was himself hanging there, his father had been so near him!

The story of the lynching had been kept from him previous to his departure, Jerry Rook alone having access to him, and carefully guarding against all other approach. It was only after his arrival in California, and failing to find his father at the appointed place, that he had heard of the tragedy on Caney creek, and who had been its victim.

The tale had got among the gold-diggers, brought out by some new arrival from Little Rock.

Why Jerry Rook had been so anxious to get him away Pierre Robideau could never tell, though he had some terrible suspicions about it, almost pointing out the old squatter as one of his father's murderers.

It was this sort of curiosity that caused him to turn among the trees and steal back to the concealment he had so recently forsaken. Perhaps, too, he may have wished once more to gratify his eyes by gazing on that loved form so unceremoniously hurried out of his sight.

Whether or not, he was soon in his old position, and gazing intently through the curtain of leaves.

So far as Jerry Rook was concerned, he obtained the satisfaction he had sought for. His quondam host was in front of the house, in conversation

with his daughter, who stood in the porch above him.

Pierre had arrived at the moment when that question was put, so nearly concerning himself. He did not hear it; but he noticed the embarrassed air of the young lady, and the quick change that came over her countenance as she adroitly evaded the answer.

From that moment Jerry Rook was no longer regarded. A third personage had appeared upon the scene, and the pleased look with which Jerry Rook's daughter appeared to receive him sent a pang through the heart of Pierre Robideau.

The exclamation had told him who the newcomer was. But he did not need that. No time could efface from his memory the image of one who had so cruelly outraged him; and six years had produced but little change in Alf Brandon. Pierre knew him on sight.

With heart beating wildly he remained, a silent witness to the scene that ensued.

At first it beat bitterly, as he marked and misinterpreted the complaisant look with which Lena regarded his rival.

Ere long came a delightful change as he listened to the dialogue—plainly overheard where he stood; and when he heard the final speech, and saw the discomfited lover start off toward the gate, he could scarce restrain himself from a shout of joy.

He would fain have sprung across the creek, and once more folded that fair form in his passionate embrace. But he saw that mischief might spring from such improvidence; and turning from the spot, he walked silently away, his heart now swelling with triumph, now subsiding into sweet contentment.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CONCLAVE OF SCOUNDRELS.

THERE was a time when "Slaughter's Hotel" was the first and only house of its kind in the town of Helena. That was when Slaughter, senior, presided over its destinies. Now that he was no more, and his son walked rather slip-shod in his shoes, it had sunk into a second-rate place of entertainment—an establishment more respectable, or at all events more pretentious, having swung out its sign.

In Slaughter's hostelry *bona fide* travelers had become scarce. Still was it not without guests and patrons in plenty. There were enough "sportsmen" in the place, with adventurers of other kinds, to give the house a custom, and these principally patronized it. From a family hotel it had changed into a drinking and gambling saloon, and in this respect was it prosperous enough. It was the resort of all the dissipated young men in the neighborhood, and old ones, too. It had its public and private parlors, and one of the latter, the landlord's own, was accessible to the select of his acquaintances—his cronies of a special type.

On the evening of that day in which Alf Brandon had received his dismissal from the daughter of Jerry Rook, this apartment was occupied by six guests, including the landlord himself. They were the same who had been figured in the hanging frolic, of which young Robideau had come so near being the victim. On this account it is not necessary to give their names, nor any description of them, further than to say that all six were as wild and wicked as ever; or, to speak with greater exactitude, wilder and more wicked.

It might seem strange that chance had brought these young men together, without any other company; but the closed door, and the order for no one to be admitted, showed that their meeting was not by mere accident. Their conversation, already commenced, told that they had met by appointment, as also the purpose of their assembling.

It was Alf Brandon who had summoned them to the secret conclave; and he who made the opening speech, declaring his object in having done so. After a drink all round, Brandon had said:

"Well, boys, I've sent for you to meet me here, and here we are. I guess you know why?"

"I guess we don't," blithely responded Buck.

"Choc?" suggested Slaughter.

"Well, we know it's about Choc," assented the son of the horse-dealer. "Any fool might guess that. But what about him? Let's hear what you've got to say, Alf."

"Well, not much, after all. Only that I think it's high time we took some steps to get rid of the infernal tax we've been paying."

"Oh! you're come to that, are you? I thought you would sometime. But for you, Alf Brandon, we might have done something long ago. I'm out o' pocket five hundred dollars, and hang me if I intend to pay another cent—come what will or may."

"Ditto with you, Bill Buck!" indorsed Slaughter. Grubbs, Randall, and Spencer were silent, though evidently inclined to the same way of thinking.

"I've sworn every year I'd stop it," continued Buck; "and I'd have done so but for Alf, there. It's all very well for him. He's rich an' can stand it. With some o' the rest of us it's doggone different."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Brandon; "my being rich had nothing to do with it. I was as anxious as any of you to get the load off my shoulders; only I could never see how it was to be done."

"Do you see now?" asked Spencer.

"Not very clearly, I confess."

"It's as clear as mud to me—one way is," said Slaughter.

"And to me," chimed in Buck.

"What to me? Tell us!" demanded the storekeeper. "I'm ready for most anything that'll clear us of this tax."

"You can get clear, then, by making a *clear of the collector!*"

The suggestion was Slaughter's, the last part of it made in a significant whisper.

"Them's just my sentiments," said Buck, speaking louder and with more determination. "I'd have put

'em in practice before this, if Alf Brandon had shown the pluck to agree to it. Darned if I wouldn't."

"What?" said the young planter, affecting ignorance of the suggested scheme. "Carry the collector off? Is that what you both mean?"

"Oh! you're very innocent, Alf Brandon, you are, my sucking dove!"

It was Slaughter who spoke.

"Yes," said Buck, in answer to the interrogatory; "carry him off, and so far that there'll be no danger o' his comin' back again. That's what we mean. Have you got any thing better to propose? If you have, let's hear it. If not, what's the use of all this palaverin'?"

"Well," said Brandon, "I've been thinking we might carry something else off that might answer our purpose as well; and without getting us into any scrape worth talking about."

"Carry what off? The girl—Rook's daughter?"

"No, no. Brandon don't mean that, nor don't need it. He's goin' to take her to church, and there's no danger about his gettin' consent."

It was Buck who made the remarks, and with some bitterness—being himself one of Lena Rook's unsuccessful admirers.

Brandon felt the sting; all the more keenly from what had that day occurred. Moreover, he knew that Buck was upon the list of his rivals, and saw that the speech was meant for a slur. The lurid light in his eye and the pallor suddenly overspreading his lips, showed the depth of his chagrin. But he said nothing, fearful of defeating the scheme he had traced out for himself in relation to Lena Rook.

"Come, gentlemen!" said Randall, for the first time entering into the conversation. "This talk only wastes time, and the subject is too serious for that. Let us hear Brandon out. I'm as anxious as any of you to settle this unpleasant matter, and if there be any safe plan we can all agree about, the sooner it's carried out the better. I needn't remind you the time's close at hand when the old Shylock will call for another pound of flesh. If any one can suggest a way to escape paying it, I think the rest of us would be but too willing to stand the best champagne supper Jim Slaughter can get up, and a 'pony' into the bargain."

"Certain, we'll go snacks for that."

"Speak out, Brandon!"

"The fact is," said Brandon, thus appealed to, "we've been all a set of fools, to stand this thing so long. Suppose we brave the old scoundrel, and dare him to do his worst, what evidence has he got against us? Only his own oath."

"And the girl's?"

"No. The girl saw nothing—at least only what was circumstantial. She couldn't swear to the dead; nor he, neither, as far as that goes, though he makes pretense that he can. Suppose he does swear to it, what then? There are six of us—six oaths to one! I needn't ask whether you are all willing."

"No, you needn't," was the unanimous rejoinder.

"Good so far. Well, you all know that Jerry Rook's oath wouldn't go far in these parts, and if we stick together, and deny the thing *in toto*, I'd like to know how a jury could give against us. We've been fools not to try it. I'd have proposed it long ago, only that, like some of the rest, I've been too thin-skinned about it, and didn't like to stir up stinkin' water."

"Yes, you've been thin-skinned 'bout it. No mistake o' that. Your deuced thin-skinnin', as you call it, has cost me five hundred silver dollars."

"Me the same," said Slaughter.

"Well, for that matter, we all had to pay alike; and now let us agree to all share alike in law expenses, in case it should come to that. For my part I don't think it will."

"And why won't it?" asked Randall, whose law experience, himself being a practitioner, guided him to a different conclusion. "You don't suppose that the old Shylock will yield without a trial? Trust me, fellows, he'll fight hard to stick to that six hundred dollars *per annum*, he's been so long pulling out of us."

"Cure him! let him fight. What can he do? Let him tell his story, and what evidence can he bring to support it? As I've said, his oath won't count for anything against all six of ours."

"But, Alf, you forget the *body*!"

This reminiscence, called up by Randall, caused all the others to start; for all had forgotten it—Brandon alone excepted.

"No, I don't," replied the latter, with an air of triumph at his own astuteness.

"Well, he'd bring that up, wouldn't he?"

"No doubt he would, if we're fools enough to let him."

"Ah! I see what you're driving at."

"So do we all."

"We know where *it* lies; we've had good reason to. We've been fools to let it lie there so long; and what do you propose, Alf?"

"We'd be softer still to let it lie there any longer."

"Darn it, there's something in what he says."

"That we go in for a bit of exhumation, and transfer that body, or bones, or whatever relics be left of it, to a safer sleeping-place. After that's done, let Jerry Rook do his best."

"A good idea!"

"Jest the thing!"

"Let's carry it out then!"

"When?"

"To-morrow night. We're not prepared now, or it might be to-night. Let us provide the tools for to-morrow night, and meet about midnight. We can come together in the glade, and go from there. Ye must all of you come, and all have a hand in it."

"Agreed! We'll do the grave-digging!"

"Enough, boys! Let's fill up and drink to our success!"

Amidst the clinking of glasses was sealed the singu-

lar compact; and the body-stealers, that were to be, soon separated, to come together again upon the morrow.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TRYST UNDER THE TREE.

UNDER the canopy of the great cottonwood the tryst of the lovers was to be kept.

Pierre was there first, and stood within the shadow of the tree, expectant.

There had been nothing to interfere with his coming, either to hinder or retard it. He had left the tavern at an early hour, telling them that he might not return that night; and, slowly sauntering through the woods, had reached the place of appointment some time before that agreed upon.

Having arrived under the tree and taken a survey of the ground, he regretted having chosen it as a rendezvous. Better need not have been desired had the night been dark. But it was not. On the contrary, a clear moon was sailing through the sky.

When Pierre Robideau last stood under that tree there was brushwood around it, with a cane-brake along the edge of the creek, burnt off long ago to enlarge the little clearing that had sufficed for the claim of the squatter. There were the stumps of other trees still, and a rough rail fence running up to the corner of the house; but, with the exception of these, any one approaching from the house side would find no cover to prevent them from being seen.

It occurred to Pierre Robideau that his sweetheart might be watched. He had reason to believe that her father kept a close eye upon her, and might be suspicious of her movements. What he had seen and heard the day before told him how things stood between Jerry Rook and Alf Brandon. Once under the cottonwood there would be no danger. Even the white dress of a woman could not be descried in the deep shadow of the moss-laden branches—at least not from any distance; and in case of any one passing accidentally near, the young man knew that the tree was hollow—a huge cavity opening into its trunk, capable of holding a horse. More than once, when a boy, had he and little Lena played hide and seek in this capacious tree-chamber.

On the other side—that opposite the house—the tree could be approached under cover, along the edge of the creek, where a thin strip of cane had been left standing undisturbed. It was through this he had himself come, after crossing the creek some distance above.

Eleven o'clock came, as he knew by a clock striking inside the house, then a long spell that seemed nearly a day, though it was not quite an hour. Still no sign of his sweetheart, nor of living thing anywhere outside the dwelling of Jerry Rook.

He could see the porch, and one of the windows beyond it. Through this came the light of lamp or candle, indistinct under the bright shimmer of the moonbeams.

Upon the window his eyes were habitually kept, and he indulged in conjectures as to who was the occupant of the lighted room. At first he supposed it to be Lena; but, as the time passed without the appointment being kept, he began to fancy it might be her father.

He had no knowledge of the interior of the house. But, if the lighted window belonged to the kitchen, it was like enough the old hunter was inside, sitting in a huge arm-chair and smoking his pipe, a habit that Pierre knew him to indulge in, in days long past. Moreover, he might sit very late up into the morning hours—as he had been often accustomed to do in those same days.

The remembrance made Pierre uneasy—especially as the time stole past, and still no appearance of the expected one.

He was beginning to despair of an interview that night, when the light, upon which his eyes had been fixed, appeared to have been put out, as the glass showed black under the moonbeams.

"It was she, then," he muttered to himself. "She has been waiting till all were well asleep. She will come now."

Forsaking the window, his gaze became fixed upon the porch, within whose shadow he expected her to appear.

She did so, but not until another long interval had expired—a fresh trial of the lover's patience. Before it was exhausted, however, a form was outlined in the dark doorway—the door having been silently opened—and soon after the moon shone down upon the drapery of a woman's dress.

The white kerchief upon her head would have enabled Pierre Robideau to recognize her. But that was not needed. The direction she took on stepping out of the porch told him it was she whom he expected.

She came on, but not as one who walks without fear. She kept along the fence, on its shadowy side, and close in to the rails. Now and then she stopped, looked behind, and listened. What she feared was evidently not abroad, but at home. Some serious cause had detained her beyond her time.

Pierre watched her with eager eyes—with heart beating impatiently, until he felt hers beating against it.

Once more they stood heart to heart, with arms entwining!

"Why was she so late? What had detained her?" The questions were put with no thought of reprobation; only fear as to the answer.

As Pierre had suspected, Jerry Rook had been sitting up late, and, as she suspected, with some idea of watching her. The lighted room was his; and it was he who had extinguished the candle. She had waited after, till he should be well asleep. She had had a terrible time of it, both that day and yesterday. Her father had been very angry with her about several things. He had found out that Pierre had been there. He had cross-questioned her, and

made her confess it. It was no use denying it as her father had found his tracks and saw the snake that had been shot; and besides, one of the negroes had heard a man's voice along with hers among the trees of the orchard. It made it all the worse that she had tried to conceal it, and been found out. Of course she did not say who it was—only a stranger she had never seen before. "Oh, Pierre! I told that great lie about you; God forgive me!" Her father had gone furious. There was something else, too, that made him so; about Alf Brandon, who had come over to see them just after Pierre had gone.

"What was it about Alf Brandon?" asked Pierre, rather calmly, considering that the individual spoken of was his most dangerous rival.

The young girl noticed this, and answered with some pique.

"Oh, nothing much!" she said, relaxing the pressure of her arms. "At least, nothing, I suppose, that you would care about."

"Nay, dear Lena," he hastily rejoined, noticing the hurt he unconsciously occasioned, and drawing her back to his heart; "pardon me for the apparent coldness of the question. I only asked because I wished to tell that I know all."

"All what, Pierre?"

"All that occurred between you and Alf Brandon."

"And who told you?"

"No one. I'm going to make a confession if you'll promise not to be angry with me."

"Angry with you, Pierre?"

"Well, then, it was thus: After leaving you yesterday, I came back again, and took stand under the cover of the trees, just over there, at the bottom of the garden. Of course, I could see the house and all in front of it. I got there just as your father was leaving to meet Mr. Brandon by the gate; and I not only saw what passed between you two, but heard most of what was said. It was as much as I could do to restrain myself from springing across the creek, and laying the fellow at your feet; but I kept back, thinking of the trouble I might get you into, to say nothing of myself, with your father. I own to all this meanness, Lena, without being able to let you know my motive for it. One reason for my returning was to look again upon you."

"Oh, Pierre!" said the girl, once more reciprocating the pressure of his embrace, "if I had only known you were there! But no. Perhaps it was better not. I might have done something that would have betrayed us both!"

"True," he said. "And from what I know of your father's designs, I see that we cannot be too cautious. But promise me, love—promise, before we part—that, no matter what may arise, nor how long it may be before I can gain your father's consent, that you will still keep true to me. Will you promise this?"

"Promise it! How could you doubt me? After six years—more, I may say; for I loved you ever since I first saw you—ay, Pierre, when I was only a little bit of a barefooted girl—after being true all that time, surely you will not doubt me now. Promise it? Anything, Pierre, anything!"

Firmer and faster became the folding of their arms—closer and closer came their lips, till meeting, they remained together in a long, rapturous kiss.

CHAPTER XXI.
THE TREE CAVE.

A long, rapturous kiss, and a kiss that came nigh betraying them. Fortunately it had ended before any one was near enough to bear witness to it, or blight its sweetness by rude interruption.

The lovers were about taking leave of one another; their arms were once more free, and they were arranging the time and place for another interview, when the quick ear of the young man, attuned to take notice of suspicious sounds, was caught by one that appeared to be of this character.

It was a rustling among the canes that bordered the creek, with now and then their culms crackling together, as if something—man or animal—was making way through them.

The sounds proceeded from a point at some distance; but as the lovers stood listening they could tell that whatever made them was drawing nearer.

And soon they saw that they were not made by an animal, nor yet by a man; but by several men, who, under the clear light of the moon, could be seen approaching the spot.

And it could be seen, too, that they were not coming on openly and boldly, like men on an honest errand; but skulking along the edge of the creek, here and there crouching under the cane, whose thin growth only partially concealed them. The noise they made was inadvertent. They were not making more than they could help, and if there was any talk between them it must have been in whispers, as no words were heard by the two standing under the tree.

For these it was too late to retreat unobserved. They might have done so at first, but not now; and any attempt to get away from the spot would expose the lovers under the full light of the moon. Their only chance to remain undiscovered was to keep within the shadow of the tree.

Not long before, this, too, appeared doubtful; as they now saw that the dark forms advancing along the edge of the stream must pass close to where they stood—so close as to see them, in spite of the obscurity.

Who the cautious travelers were, or what their design, neither had the slightest idea. But it mattered not what. Enough for the lovers to know that they were in danger of being surprised, and under circumstances to cause them chagrin.

What was to be done? The skulkers were coming on. They would soon be under the tree!

The returned gold-seeker had taken the young girl in his arms—partly with the idea of protecting her,

should any rudeness be attempted, and partly to inspire her with courage.

He was thinking whether it would not be best for them to step boldly out, and show themselves in the open light. It would less expose them to ridicule; though the lateness of the hour—it was now after midnight—would still render them liable to that. A young lady and gentleman—they had markedly this appearance—indulging in a moonlight stroll at night one o'clock of the morning, were not likely to escape scandal—if seen.

What was to be done?

At this moment a happy thought came up to answer the question. It flashed simultaneously through the minds of both. Both remembered the cavity in the tree; and without a word to one another—both acting under the same impulse—they glided inside, and stood in the shadow dark as the dungeon itself.

They had scarce time to compose themselves ere the party of intruders came up, and stopped right under the tree. To their chagrin they saw this. They had hoped that such early travelers might be bent upon some distant journey; and that once past the spot, they would be themselves free to continue their affectionate leave-taking.

They soon perceived that this was not to be. The new-comers had halted close up to the trunk, directly in front of the cavity; and though enveloped in deep shadow, their figures were distinguishable from the deeper shadow that surrounded the two spectators. Either of these could have touched them by stretching forth a hand!

Neither had a thought of doing this. On the contrary, they stood motionless as marble, both silently striving to keep back their breath.

Six figures there were—six men—several of them carrying implements, at first taken for guns, but which, on more prolonged scrutiny, proved to be spades and shovels. From the way they were manipulating these tools, it was evident they intended making use of them, and on the spot!

The occupants of the tree-cave were puzzled by these preparations. For what were they going to dig?"

The blood of both ran cold at the thought of its being a grave. And both had it. What else could they have thought? Six men, armed with excavating implements, at that unearthly hour of the night!

And a secret grave, too; for the body of some one whom they had murdered!! Else, why their stealthy movements, and their talking in low tones, scarce louder than a whisper?

Who could they be? And what their purpose? These were the questions that came before the minds of Pierre Robideau and Lena Rook. Only in thought. They dared not interrogate one another—even in whispers!

They stood silent, watching the development of events.

"Where can the darned thing be?" asked one of the men, stooping down, and apparently searching for something along the grass. "Who of ye remembers the spot?"

"A little further out, I think," answered a voice that caused Lena Rook to start, and take hold of Pierre's hand. "About here. Yes, here it is. I can feel the lumps upon the turf."

The speaker appeared to be groping the ground with his feet.

"Alf Brandon!" whispered the girl, with her lips close to her companion's ear.

The others gathered around the spot indicated by Brandon.

Two, who carried spades, commenced digging, while a like number of shovel-men, followed, throwing out the loose earth.

"Wonder how deep the old skunk has buried him?" asked one.

"Not very deep, Ireck'n. Jerry Rook's too lazy to a' dug fur down. We'll soon come to it."

These were the voices of Bill Buck, and Slaughter, the hotel-keeper, recognized by Lena Rook, though not by her companion.

"Do you think there's a coffin?" inquired one who had not yet spoken. It was Spencer.

"No," answered another new speaker, recognizable as lawyer Randall, "I should say not. The old squatter wasn't likely to take that trouble for such a creature as Choc.; and as the fellow had no other friends, I think you'll find him in his deer-skin shirt—that is, if Jerry hasn't taken the pains to strip him."

"The shirt wasn't worth it," remarked a sixth speaker, who was the storekeeper, Grubbs.

"The six who hanged you, Pierre!" whispered the girl to him by his side. "The very same!"

Pierre made no reply. He was too much occupied in endeavoring to interpret the strange talk, and comprehend the singular scene passing before him.

"It's getting hard down here," said one of the spadesmen. "It seems to me I've touched bottom."

"Old Jerry must have trampled him tight down!" remarked another, adding a slight laugh.

"Don't speak so loud, boys!" commanded Brandon. "Look at the house. 'Tisn't twenty yards off; and there's a weasel in it that seldom sleeps. If we're heard, you know what'll follow. Keep silent; it may save each of you a hundred dollars a year."

At this appeal the diggers turned their eyes toward the house; but only to give it a cursory glance, and back to the ground again.

Lena Rook looked longer in that direction; for there was the thing she most feared—her father.

Intimately acquainted with the precincts of the dwelling, and of course better able to tell if anything was stirring, she saw, what had escaped the notice of the body-stealers, the front door standing open! It should have been shut; for, on coming out, she had carefully closed it behind her.

She had scarce made the discovery when she saw a figure in the doorway, that, after standing a moment, as if to reconnoiter and listen, stole out onto the porch, and then stealthily descending the steps, glided crouchingly toward the cover of the orchard. Only for a moment was it under the moonlight; but the young girl had no difficulty in recognizing the form of her father!

Something in his hand glistens in the moonlight. It appeared to be a gun.

With his attention called to it by a significant pressure on his arm, Pierre also saw the flitting figure, and knew whose it was.

The weasel, as Alf Brandon termed him, had not been asleep!

And just like a weasel he had acted—in sight only for six seconds, as he shot across the open space between the porch and the peach trees. Once among these he was invisible to the only eyes that had seen him—those of his daughter and Pierre Robideau.

But both expected soon to see him again. He had not gone into the orchard for nothing, and his cat-like movements told that he had suspicion of something astir under the cottonwood, and that he was stealing around by the creek to approach it unobserved.

Whether he yet saw the excavators could not be known; but he must have heard the clinking of their tools as he stood in the doorway.

No one of them either heard or saw him, as, without passing, they continued their work, Brandon once again having counseled them to silence.

"Darned if 'tain't the bottom! I told you so!" said Bill Buck, striking his spade-point against the ground between his feet. "That's been neyther pick nor spade into this—not since the days o' old Noah, Ireck'n. Here! Try for yourself, Alf Brandon!"

Brandon took the implement offered, and struck it upon the space already stripped and sunk some eighteen inches below the surface. The ring was that of solid earth that had never been disturbed by a spade.

He tried it in several places, all of which gave back the same sound!

"Clear out the lower mold!" commanded he.

This was done; and once more was the test applied.

"There's no grave there," remarked Randall.

"Nor body!" said Spencer.

"Not as much as a bone!" added Buck. "No, nor ever has been! Dog-gone my cats if old Rook hasn't been humbuggin' us!"

"Ha! ha! ha! He! he! he!"

The sounds thus represented were intended for a laugh, that came from the other side of the tree, and in a voice that did not belong to any of the excavating party.

Whatever mirth may have been in the man who uttered them, it failed to communicate itself to any of the six grave-diggers, all of whom started at the strange voice, and stood staring wildly around them.

If the body for which they had been searching had suddenly appeared in their midst and given utterance to that unearthly cachinnation, they could not have been more astonished.

And their astonishment lasted until a man well known to them stepped from behind the tree, and discovered himself in the clear moonlight.

"Jerry Rook, by the Eternal!"

CHAPTER XXII. THE DIGGERS DISMISSED.

"YES, Jerry Rook, by the Eternal!" exclaimed the old hunter, with another mocking laugh. "An' why that, I shed like to know? Do it astonish ye to see a man by the side o' his own gurden? I reck'n this chile hev got more reezun to be surprised at seein' you hyar—one an' all o' ye. Who air ye, anyhow?" he asked, drawing nearer to the party, and pretending to examine their faces. "If this chile ain't mistaken, he heerd Bill Buck among ye. Yes, Billee, that's you, an' Mr. planter Brandon, an' as that's four more o' ye, I reck'n I kin guess who the t'others are. An' what mout ye 'a' been doin'? Spades an' shovels! Ho! ho! Ye've been a grave-diggin', hev ye? Well, I hope ye've goed deep enough. You're a-gwine to berry somebody, air ye?"

There was no reply. The six excavators had thrown down their tools, and stood in sullen silence.

"Maybe ye war arter the other thing—doin' a bit o' disinterring, as they call it? Wal, I hope ye foun' what ye hev been rootin' for?"

Still no response.

"An' so, Mr. Bill Buck, ye think that Jerry Rook hez been a-humbuggin' ye?"

"I do," replied Buck, doggedly.

"And so do I."

"Yes; so all of us."

"Oh! ye're agreed 'beout that, air ye? Wal, ye ain't a-gwine to humbug me, as ye've been jest now a-tryin'. I warn't sech a precious fool as to put the poor young fellar's karkiss whar he ked um an' scrape it up ag'in whenever you'd a mind. Ne'er a bit o'it. I've got it safer stowed away than that; an' I'll take care o'it, too, till you refuse to keep to your contract. When any o'ye do that, I'll then do a bit o' disinterring myself; you see if I don't."

The discomfited excavators had once more relapsed into silence. Having nothing to say by which they could justify themselves, they made no attempt. It was no use to deny either what they had been doing or its design. Jerry Rook saw the one, and guessed the other.

"Ye 'pear very silent 'beout it," he continued, jeeringly. "Wal, ef you've got nothing to say, I reck'n you'd better all go hum to yur beds an' sleep the thing over. Perhaps some o' ye may dream whar the body air laid. Ha! ha! ha!"

They were not all silent, though their speech was

not addressed to him. There was whispering among themselves, in which Bill Buck and Slaughter took the principal part; and had there been light enough for Jerry Rook to see the faces of these two men, and the demoniac fire in their eyes, as they glanced at him and then toward the spades, he might have changed his hilarious tone, and perhaps made a hasty retreat into the house.

There was a suggestion that the half-dug grave should be deepened, and a body put into it—the body of Jerry Rook! It came from Slaughter, and was backed by Bill Buck. But the others were not plucky enough for such an extreme measure, and the old squatter was spared. Perhaps his rifle had something to do with the decision. They saw that he had it with him, and, although Jerry Rook was a sexagenarian, they knew him to be a sure and deadly shot. He would not be conquered without a struggle.

"What the ole Nick are ye whisperin' 'beout?" he asked, seeing their heads together. "Plottin' some kind o' conspiracy, air ye? Wal, plot away. Ef ye ken think o' any way that'll git ye cl'ar o' payin' me yur hundred dollars apiece pre-annum, I'd like to hear it. I know a way myself. Maybe you'd like to hear it?"

"Let's hear it, then!"

"Well, I'm open to an offer, or I'll make one to you—whichsomever you weesh."

"Make it!"

"Durn it, don't be so short 'beout it. I only want to be accommodatin'. Ef you'll each an' all o' ye pay me five hundred apiece, down on the nail, an' no deduckshin, I'll gi'e you a cl'ar receet, an' squar' up the hull bizness. Now!"

"We can't give you an answer now, Jerry Rook," interposed the planter, without waiting for the others. "We shall consider your proposal, and tell you what we will do some other time."

"Wal, take yur time; but remember, all o' ye, that Saturday next air the day o' the annual settin', an' don't fail to meet me at the usoal place. I hain't no spare beds, or I'd ask ye all in. But I s'pose ye'll be a-goin' back wi' Mr. Slaughter thatan havin' a drink by the way o' night-cap? Don't forgit yur spades—they mout git stole ef you left 'em hyar."

This bit of irony terminated the scene, so far as the disappointed resurrectionists were concerned, who, like a band of prowling jackals, scared from a carcass, sneaked sulky away.

"He! he! he!" chuckled the old pirate, as he stood watching them out of the field. "He! he! he!" he continued, stooping over the fresh-turned earth, and examining their work. "They war playin' a game wi' poor cards in thar hands—the set o' cursed green horns."

"Durnation!"

That this last exclamation had no reference to the episode just ended, was evident from the cloud that passed over his countenance while giving utterance to it. Something else had come into his thoughts, at once changing from gay to grave.

"Durnation!" he repeated, stamping on the ground and glancing angrily around him; "I'd most forgotten it! Whar kin the gal be gone?"

"Ain't in her bed, nor hain't been this night! Ain't in the house neyther! Where kin she be?"

"I thort I mout 'a' foun' her hyar; but this hain't hed nuthin' to do wi' her. It keden't a' hed."

"Durn me if I don't believe she's good to meet some 'un; an' maybe that same fellar as shot the snake. Who the red thunder kin he be? By the Eternal, ef be so, I'll put an eend to his snake-shootin'!"

"Whar kin the gurl be? I shell look all night, or I'll find her. She ain't in the orchard, or I'd see'd her comin' through. An' shurely she hain't good across the crik? Maybe she's strayed up behind the stables, or the corn-cribs? I'll try that."

The hearts of the lovers, so long held in a suspense almost agonizing, began to beat more tranquilly as they saw him pass away from the spot.

It was but a short respite—lasting only the time occupied by Jerry Rook in taking ten steps.

A hound, baying about the field, had strayed up to the tree and poked his snout into the cavity where they stood concealed.

A short, sharp yelp, followed by a growl, proclaimed the presence of something that ought not to be there.

"Yoick! good dog!" cried the ci-devant hunter, quick harking to the cry. "What you got that?"

Hastily returning to the tree, and stopping in front of the dark entrance, he continued:

"Someb'dy inside that? Who air it? Lena, gurl, is you?"

Silence, broken only by the baying of the hound.

"Hush up, you brute," cried his master, driving off the dog with a kick. "Hear me thar, you inside! Tain't no good playin' possum. Ef it's you, Lena gurl, I command ye to come out!"

Thus summoned, the girl saw it would be no use disobeying. It could serve no purpose, and would only end in her father stepping inside the cavity, and dragging her angrily forth.

"I'll go," she whispered to her companion, "but stay you, Pierre, and don't stir. Hell think I'm alone."

Pierre had no chance to remonstrate; for on speaking the words she stepped hastily out, and stood fee to face with her father.

"So, so! I've foun' you at last, hev I? An' thet's the hole in which ye war hidin', is it? Nice place thet for a young lady, as ye think yurself, at this time o' the night! An' nice party ye've been havin' clost to ye! Come, gurl! No denial o' what you've been doin', but give an explanation o' yurself! How kin you be hyar?"

"Oh, father! I was walking about. It was such a beautiful night, and I couldn't sleep. I thought I'd

come out into the field, and have a strott down here to the old tree. I was standing under it when I saw them coming up—Alf Brandon and the others."

"Well, go on?"

"I couldn't get back without their seeing me; and as I was afraid of them, I slipped inside the hollow."

"An' ye war there all the time, war ye?"

"Yes, all the time."

"Wal, an' what did you hear?"

"A great deal, father. It'll take time to tell it all. If you'll come on into the house, I can repeat better what was said by them. I'm so frightened after what I heard, I want to get away from this horrible place."

It was a commendable stratagem, to secure the retreat of her lover. Unfortunately it did not succeed. The old squatter was too astute to be so easily deceived.

"Oh, yes," he said, "I'll go 'long wi' ye into the house; but not afore I've just seed whether that ain't somethin' else in the holler o' this tree."

His daughter trembled as he faced toward the entrance; but her trembling turned to a convulsed agony as she heard the cocking of his rifle, and saw him point it toward the dark cavity in the trunk.

With a wild cry she sprang forward, placing herself right before the muzzle of the gun. Then, in the terrible agitation of the moment, forgetting all, she shouted:

"Come out, Pierre! come out!"

"Pierre!" cried the furious father. "What Pierre?"

"Oh, father, it is Pierre Robideau!"

It was well Lena Rook had grasped the barrel of the rifle, and turned it aside, else along with the last speech a bullet would have been sent inside the tree.

But it was now too late, and Jerry Rook saw it. The young man had sprung out, and was standing by his side. Any attempt at violence on his part would have ended in his being dashed instantly to the earth. Beside Pierre Robideau he was like an old wasted wolf in the presence of a young strong panther.

He felt his inferiority, and cowered upon the instant. He even assumed the counterfeit of friendship.

"Oh, 't air you, Pierre, is it? I wouldn't 'a' knowned you, it's so long since I see'd ye. You kin go in, gurl. I want to hev some talk wi' Pierre."

Lena looked as though she would have stayed. It was a look of strange meaning; but it wore off as she reflected that her lover could be in no danger now, and she walked slowly away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A COMPROMISE.

For some seconds Jerry Rook stood in the shadow without saying a word, but thinking intently.

His thoughts were black and bitter. The return of Pierre Robideau would be nothing less than ruin to him—depriving him of the support upon which, for years, he had been living. Once Buck, Brandon & Co., should ascertain that he they supposed dead was still living, not only would the payment be stopped, but they might demand to be recouped the sums of which he had so cunningly mulcted them.

He had not much fear of the last. If they had not actually committed murder, they would be still indictable for the attempt, and though, under the circumstances, they might not fear any severe punishment, they would yet shrink from the exposure.

It was not the old score that Jerry Rook was troubled about, but the prospect now before him. No more blackmail—no money from any source; and Alf Brandon, his creditor, now released from the bondage in which he had hitherto been held, spited by the rejection of yesterday, would lose no time in coming down upon him for the debt.

The quondam squatter saw before him only a future of gloom and darkness—ejection from his ill-gotten house and clearing—a return to his lonely life—to toil and poverty, along with a dishonored old age.

Mingled with these black thoughts there was one blacker—a regret that he had not pulled the trigger in time!

Had he shot Pierre Robideau inside the tree all would have been well. No one would have known that he had killed him, and to his own daughter he could have pleaded ignorance that there was any one inside. Much as she might have lamented the act, she could scarce have believed it willful, and would have said nothing about it.

It was too late now. To kill the young man as he stood—in the darkness it might still have been done—or even at a later time, would be the same as to murder him under the eyes of his daughter. From what she now knew, the hand of the assassin could not be concealed.

These thoughts occupied Jerry Rook scarce any time. They came and passed like lightning.

His prolonged silence was due to other thoughts. He was reflecting on what course he would take with the man whose unexpected appearance had placed him in such a dilemma.

Turning to the latter, he at length spoke.

"How long 've ye been back, Pierre?"

The tones of pretended kindness did not deceive the returned gold-seeker.

"I came into the neighborhood yesterday," he replied, coldly.

"Hey ye see'd any one that know'd ye?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Ye'll excuse me for being a leetle rough wi' ye. I war a bit flurried 'beout the gurl bein' out, not knowin' who she war with. That's a lot o' fellars arter her, an' it's right I shed be careful."

Pierre could not object to this.

"O' coarse," proceeded Jerry, after another pause of reflection, "ye heerd all 't passed between me an' that lot o' diggers?"

"Every word of it."

"An' I suppose you know who they war?"

"Yes: I have good reason."

"Y'r right thar. Ye'll be knowin' then, why this chile ain't livin' any more in the ole shanty, but in a good comf'able frame house wi' a claim roun' it?"

"Yes, Jerry Rook, I think I understand that matter."

"You won't wonder, then, why I tuk so much pains six yeern ago, to send ye out o' the way? No doubt ye wondered at that?"

"I did. I don't now. It's all clear enough."

"An' I reck'n it'll be equally clair to ye, that yur comin' back ain't a-gwine to do me any good. Jest ruinate me; that's all."

"I don't see that, Jerry Rook."

"Ye don't! But this chile do. The minute any o' them six sets eyes on you, my game's up, an' that's nuthin' more left fur me but cl'r out o' this, an' take to the trees ag'in. At my time o' life, that'ree'll be pleasant."

"You mean that by my showing myself you would lose the six hundred dollars per annum I have heard you mention?"

"Not only that, but—I reck'n I may as well tell you—I'm in debt to Alf Brandon, an' it was only by his believin' in y'r deth I hev been able to stave it off. Now, Pierre Robideau!"

In his turn the gold-seeker stood reflecting.

"Well, Jerry Rook," he rejoined, after a time, "as to the black-mail you've been levying on those six scoundrels, I have no particular wish to see them relieved of it. It is but a just punishment for what they did to me; and, to tell you the truth, it has to some extent taken the sting out of my vengeance; for I had come back determined upon terrible satisfaction. While serving yourself, you've been doing some service to me!"

"Maybe," suggested the old pirate, pleased at the turn matters appeared to be taking—"maybe, Pierre, ye'd like things to go on as they air, an' let me giv'e you more o' the same sort o' satisfackshun? That's a way o' doin' it, 'ithout any harm to y'rself. It's only for you to keep out o' sight!"

Pierre was again silent, as if reflecting on the answer. He at length gave it.

"You speak truth, Jerry Rook. There is a way as you have said; but it must be coupled with a condition."

"What condishun?"

"Your daughter."

"What o' her?"

"I must have her for my wife."

Rook recoiled at the proposal. He was thinking of Alf Brandon, and the plantation—the grand estate he had so long coveted and set his heart upon having.

On the other side were the six hundred dollars a year. But what was this in comparison? And coupled with a young man for his son-in-law who was not even a full-blooded white—poor, perhaps penniless. No doubt he had come back without a dollar in his pocket.

Was this certain? He had been to California, the country of gold. From what could be seen of him in the dim light, he appeared well-dressed; and his speech proclaimed him well-instructed. He had certainly changed much from the time of his departure. He may not have returned either so fortuneless or friendless.

These conjectures kept Jerry Rook from making an immediate answer. Taking advantage of his silence, the young man continued:

"I know, Jerry Rook, you will be wanting for your son-in-law some one with means; at least enough to support your daughter in a decent position of society. I am fortunate enough to have this, obtained by hard toll in the gold placers of California. If you wish satisfaction on this head, I can refer you to the Pacific Banking Company of San Francisco, where, three years ago, I deposited my three years' gatherings—in all, I believe, about fifty thousand dollars."

"Fifty thousand dollars! D'y'e mean that, Pierre Robideau?"

"I mean it. If I had a light here I could show you the proof of the deposit."

"Come into the house, Pierre! I don't mean for a light. Ye'll stay all night? Thar's a spare bed; an' Lena 'll see to yur having some supper. Come along in!"

The lucky gold-seeker made no opposition to the proffered hospitality; and in five minutes after, he was seated by the fireside of the man who, but five minutes before, had been chafing at having lost the opportunity of spilling his blood!

CHAPTER XXIV.

ANOTHER EAVESDROPPER.

JERRY ROOK and his guest had scarce closed the door behind them, when a man who had been skulking behind the cottonwood, came out into the front, and paused upon the spot they had left. He had been on the other side of the tree from the time they commenced their conversation, and heard it all.

This man was Alfred Brandon.

The reader may wonder why Alfred Brandon had suddenly taken it into his head to get rid of the payment of the annuity to Jerry Rook. A word here to elucidate the point.

Up to this time, the hope—perhaps the expectation—of success of his suit with the fair Lena, had made the thralldom in which Jerry Rook held him an easy one. But that hope no longer existed—at least, his last memorable interview with Lena Rook had convinced him that the usual methods of wooing were not adapted to the present emergency: and he therefore turned to those extreme measures which better suited the violence of his temper, and in which he was more expert than in the blandishments of the boudoir.

To emancipate himself from the relentless clutch

of Jerry Rook must be the first step of all. This important point gained, he would then be free to adopt any course which seemed best adapted to the accomplishment of his ulterior purposes.

As affairs stood at present, Jerry Rook was master. But, once free from his control, the position would be reversed. As the old hunter had more than intimated, Brandon had the power at any moment to sweep away the pleasant home of which he had become possessed, and to send him back to the original poverty from which he had so adroitly emerged. And this power the young planter—it need not be said—was well disposed to use—either to hold it, *in terrorem*, over the daughter, to induce her to reconsider her refusal and so save her father and herself from pecuniary ruin, or, failing in this, to exact, like Shylock, the payment of his bond, and thus reduce them to beggary. Hence his sudden change of tactics.

But what had brought Alfred Brandon back to the cottonwood? The explanation was easy enough.

The six resurrectionists did not all go to Helena, as Jerry Rook hinted they might do. On getting out of Jerry's clearing, only five of them had turned toward the town—Brandon toward his own home, not far off in the opposite direction.

The planter, on parting with the others, instead of continuing homeward sat down upon a stump by the side of the path, and taking out a cigar commenced smoking it.

He had no particular reason for thus stopping on his way—only that, after such a disappointment, he knew he could not sleep, and the cigar might do something to compose his exasperated mind.

He was still within ear-shot of Jerry Rook's house; and he had scarcely ignited his cigar when a sound reached his ear from that direction. It was the yell of a hound, followed by the animal's howling.

Soon after was heard the voice of a man speaking in harsh accents, and soon after this, another voice—a woman's!

On the still, silent night they were borne to Brandon's ears with sufficient distinctness for him to recognize them as the voice of Jerry Rook and his daughter.

Starting up from the stump, and flinging himself over the fence, he proceeded toward the place where the voices were still heard in excited and earnest conversation.

Had Brandon not feared discovering himself to the speakers, he might have been up in time to see Pierre Robideau step forth from the cavity of the tree, and Lena Rook protecting him from the wrath of her father. But the necessity of approaching unobserved, by skulking along the creek and keeping under cover of the canes delayed him; and he only arrived behind the cottonwood as the young lady was being ordered into the house.

For Alfred Brandon there was surprise enough without that. The presence of Pierre Robideau, whose name he had heard distinctly pronounced, with the sight of a tall form dimly shadowed under the tree, which he knew must be that of the *murdered* man, was sufficient to astonish him to his heart's content.

It had this effect; and he stood behind the cottonwood whose shelter he had reached, in speechless wonder, trembling from the crown to the toes.

Though this fear soon forsook him, his wonder was scarce diminished, when the dialogue between Jerry Rook and Pierre Robideau furnished him with a key to the mysterious reappearance of the latter upon the banks of Caney creek.

"God 'a' mercy!" gasped he, stepping from behind the huge tree-trunk, and looking after them as they were entering the house. "Here's news for Messrs. Buck, Slaughter, Grubbs, Spencer and Randall! Glad they'll be to hear it, and at least get relief from their debt. This I reck'n 'll cancel it."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, adding a fearful oath, "it's all very well for them, but what matters the money to me? I'd pay it ten times over, and all my life, to have that girl; and hang me if I don't have her yet, for wife or for worse."

"Choc still alive and kicking! Cut down, then, before he got choked outright! Darned if I didn't more than half suspect it, from the way old Rook talked about the burying and the body. The precious old pirate! hasn't he bilked us nicely?"

"Mr. Pierre Robideau! Yes, that was his name, and this is the same fellow. I remember his voice as if it were yesterday. Missing for six years in California! And's picked up fifty thousand worth of yellow gravel! Lodged it in a bank, too—San Francisco. No doubt going there again and will be wanting to take Lena Rook with him!"

At this thought another fierce oath leaped from his lips, and his face showed an expression upon it that might have done credit to the stage of a suburban theater.

"Never!" he ejaculated, "never shall she go, if I can find means to prevent it."

He stood for a time reflecting.

"There's a way," he again broke forth, "a sure way. Buck would be the man to lend a hand in it. He's crazed about the girl himself, and when he knows there's no chance for him, and thinks it's this fellow stands in the way—? Besides, he wants money, and wouldn't mind risking something to get it."

"If he don't I'll do it myself. I will, by the Eternal! I'd rather die upon the scaffold than the Indian should have her—he or any one else."

"There can't be much danger if one only gets the chance. He's been missing once, and nobody missed him. He can go gold-hunting again—this time never to return. He shall do it!"

An oath again clinched the ambiguous threat.

Apparently relieved by having expressed his dark determination, he proceeded, in a calmer strain:

"Won't they be glad to hear of this resurrection? I wonder if they're still at Slaughter's? They went there. Sure to be there yet. I'll go. It'll make their hearts happier than all the liquor in the tavern. Good-night, Jerry Rook. Take care of your guest. Next time he goes off, it won't be by your sending of him."

After this sham apostrophe, he struck off across the field, and once more clambering over the fence, took the road leading to Helena.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE STRANGER GUEST.

The fifth installment of "hush money" that had been paid to Jerry Rook proved to be the last.

On meeting the contracting parties and applying for the sixth, he found to his great surprise, as well as chagrin, that the grand secret was gone out of his keeping and his power over them was at an end!

They were not only prepared to repudiate, but talked of his refunding so far, and even threatened to lynch him on the spot. So far from urging his claim, he was but too glad to get out of their company.

It is probable they would have insisted upon repayment, and put the lynching in practice, but for fear of the scandal that either must necessarily create in the community. To this was Jerry indebted for escape from their vengeful indignation.

Who could have told them that Pierre Robideau still lived?

This was the question put by Jerry Rook to himself as he rode back to the house filled with mortification.

It could not have been Pierre himself, who was now his welcome guest, and had been so ever since the night of that strange encounter under the cottonwood? Though the returned gold-seeker had strolled about the clearing, with Lena for his companion, he had never once gone beyond the boundaries, and could scarce have been seen by any outsider. No one—neighbor or stranger—had been near the house. The half-dozen negroes who belonged to Jerry Rook, had no previous acquaintance with Pierre Robideau's person; and even had it been otherwise, they could scarce have recognized him now.

Who then could have been the informer?

For the life of him Jerry Rook could not guess; and Pierre himself, when told of it, was equally puzzled upon the point.

The only conjecture at all probable was, that some one had seen and identified him: one of the gang themselves; or it might have been some individual totally uninterested, who, by chance, had seen and recognized him, soon after his arrival at the stand.

Now that his being alive was known to them there was no longer any object in his keeping concealed, and he went about the settlements as of yore, at times visiting the town of Helena for the purchase of such commodities as he required.

He had taken up his stay at the house of his former host, and was so often seen in the company of his host's daughter, that it soon became talked of in the neighborhood. Those who took any interest in the affairs of Jerry Rook's family were satisfied that his daughter, so long resisting, had at length yielded her heart to the dark-skinned, but handsome stranger who was staying at her father's house.

There were few accustomed to have communication either with the quondam squatter or his people. It was a time when there were many new-comers in the surrounding settlements, and a stranger of whatever kind attracted but slight attention. Under these circumstances, Pierre escaped much notice and many remarks that otherwise might have been made about him.

There was more than one, however, keenly sensible of his existence—his rivals with Lena Rook—who saw with black bitterness that the smiles of the young lady were being bestowed upon him.

Bill Buck was among the number of these disappointed aspirants; but the chief sufferer was Alfred Brandon. With heart on fire, and bosom brimful of jealous rage, he heard all this talk about Jerry Rook's daughter and her stranger sweetheart.

It in no way tranquilized his spirit when Jerry Rook returned him his loan of the thousand dollars, and promptly on the first demand. It but further embittered it; for he could not help knowing whence the money came. He saw that his wealth would no longer avail him. There would be no chance now of reducing the parent to that penury that would give him over the child. His scheme had fallen through; and he set himself to the conception of some new plan that would help him either to Lena Rook or revenge.

He spent nearly the whole of his time in reflecting upon his atrocious purpose—brooding over it until he had come to the determination of committing *murder*!

Several times he had thought of this, but on each occasion had recoiled at the thought, less from horror of the crime itself than from fear of the consequences.

He had half resolved to make a common cause with Bill Buck, and induce him to become a confederate in the foul deed. But the doubtful character of the horse-dealer's son—each day getting darker—had scared him from entering into such a perilous partnership; and he still kept his designs locked up within his own troubled bosom.

It was about ten days after the returned gold-seeker had taken up his residence at the house of Jerry Rook, when an errand called him to the town of Helena. It was the mending of his bridle-bit, which had been broken by accident, and required to be half an hour in the hands of a blacksmith.

It was a bridle he had brought with him from the

Choctaw country—an Indian article, with reins of plaited horsehair—and as he had no other, it necessitated his going afoot.

In this way he started from Jerry Rook's house, leaving Jerry Rook's daughter at the door—looking lovingly after, and calling to him to come soon back.

The distance was not great, and in less than an hour after he was at and in the blacksmith's shop, a tranquil spectator to the welding of his broken bit.

There was one who saw him there, whose spirit was less composed—one who had seen him entering the town, and had sauntered after at a distance, careless-like, but closely watching him. This was not a citizen of the place, but a man in planter costume, who, by the spurs upon his heels, had evidently ridden in from the country. He carried a rifle, as was common at the time to all going abroad, no matter what distance, on horseback.

The man thus armed and accoutered was Alfred Brandon.

There were plenty of other people in the streets, and but few took note of him as he walked carelessly along. No one noticed the lurid light in his eye, nor the tight contraction of his lips, that spoke of some dangerous design.

Much less were these indications observed by the man who was calling them forth. Standing beside the blacksmith's forge, quietly watching the work, Pierre Robideau had no thought of the eyes that were upon him, nor did he even know that Brandon was in town. Little dreamt he at that moment how near was a treacherous enemy, thirsting for his blood.

Brandon's design was to pick a quarrel with the stranger, and before the latter could draw in his defense, shoot him down in his tracks. In this there would be nothing strange for the streets of Helena, nor anything very reprehensible.

Pierre was armed with knife and pistol; but both were carried unseen.

All at once the planter appeared to recoil from his purpose. Looking askant, he had spent some time in scrutinizing his intended victim, as if calculating the chances of a recontrover. Perhaps the stalwart frame, and strong, vigorous arms of the *cl-devant* gold-seeker rendered him apprehensive about the issue, and caused him to change his resolution. The protruding breast of Pierre Robideau's coat told of pistol, or other weapon, and should the first fire fail, his own life, and not that of the unsuspecting adversary, might be forfeit in the affray.

While thus communing with his own mind, a still fouler thought came into it, kindling in his eye with a still more sinister light.

Suddenly turning away, as if from some change of design, he strolled back along the street, entered the stable where he had left his horse, and, mounting inside the stable-yard, rode hastily out of the town,

CHAPTER XXVI.

A REVENGE.

ABOUT half an hour after the hunter had taken his departure from Helena, Pierre Robideau paid for the mending of his bridle, and, having no other errand to detain him in the town, started homeward—afoot, as he had come.

The road to Jerry Rook's house still corresponded with that leading to Little Rock; only that the latter, now much traveled, no longer passed through the well-known glade—a better crossing of Caney creek having caused it to diverge before it entered this natural clearing. The old trace, however, was that taken by any one going to Rook's house, and by it Pierre Robideau was making his return from the town. With the bridle lashed belt-like across his shoulder, he was walking unsuspectingly along, thinking how pleased Lena Rook would be at seeing him so soon back.

On entering the glade, a change came over his spirit, indicated by a dark cloud suddenly overspreading his face. It was natural enough at sight of the too well-remembered tree, recalling not only his own agonies, but the foul murder there committed—for he knew that upon that same tree his unfortunate father, whom he could not think otherwise than innocent, had been sacrificed to the madness of a fanatic mob.

There still was the branch extended toward him, as if mockingly to remind him of a vengeance still unsatisfied.

An impulse came over him he was unable to resist; and, yielding to it, he stopped in his tracks, and stood gazing upon the tree, a strange, lurid light showing in his eyes.

All at once he felt a shock in the right arm, accompanied by a stinging sensation, as if from the bite of an insect. But it was not this, for almost at the same instant he heard the "spang" of a rifle, and saw a puff of smoke floating up over some bushes directly before him. It was a shot that had been fired; and the blood, spouting from his torn coat-sleeve, left no doubt of its having been fired at himself.

Nor there be any as to the deadly intention, though the damage done was only a slight abrasion of the arm, scarce deeper than the thickness of the skin.

Pierre Robideau did not stay to reflect on this. The moment he saw the smoke, he sprang forward, and ran on till he had reached the spot where the bushes were still enveloped in the slow-scattering, sulphurous vapor.

He could see no one there; but this did not surprise him. It was not likely that such an assassin would stay to be discovered. But he must still be near, stealing off among the trees. Suspending his breath, Pierre stood to listen.

For a time he could hear nothing, not even the rustling of a leaf, and he was beginning to fear that

he might again be made the mark of an unseen murderous bullet, when the screech of a jay came sharply through the trees. It gave him instant relief, for he knew by the continued scolding of the bird that some one was intruding upon its haunts. It must be the retreating assassin. Guided by the clattering of the jay, he recommended the pursuit.

He had not gone twenty yards further when he heard footsteps, and the "swish" of leaves, as if some one was making way through the underwood. Directed by these sounds, he rushed rapidly after.

Ten seconds more and he was in sight of a saddled horse standing tied to a tree, and a man in the act of untying him. This man was making all haste, hindered by a heavy rifle, carried in his hand. It was the gun that had just been discharged; and Pierre Robideau recognized the man who had made attempt to murder him.

"Alfred Brandon!"

With a shout such as only an Indian-born could give, he bounded forward; and before the retreating assassin could climb into his saddle, he seized him by the throat, and dashed him against the trunk of a tree. The horse, frightened by the fierce onslaught, gave a loud neigh, and galloped off.

"Thank God!" cried Robideau, "and you yourself, Mr. Alf Brandon, for giving me this chance. I've got you exactly where I wanted you! For six years I've been longing for this hour; and now it has come, as if I had planned it myself."

Brandon, by this time recovered from the shock, threw down his gun, drew pistol, and was about to fire. But before he could get his finger on the trigger his antagonist seized him by the wrist, and wrenching the weapon from his hand, dashed him a second time against the tree-trunk. Reeling and giddy, he saw the muzzle of his own pistol pointed at his head, and expected nothing else but the bullet through his brain. The cry of the coward came from his lips as he writhed under the terrible anticipation.

To his astonishment the shot was not fired!

Pierre Robideau, flinging the pistol away, stood before him apparently unarmed!

"No, Mr. Alf Brandon," said he, "shooting is too good for such a dog as you; and a dog's death you shall have. Come away from here! Come on! I want to see which of us can hang longest by the hand. We tried it six years ago; but the trial wasn't a fair one. 'Tis your turn now. Come on!"

More than ever astonished, Brandon hesitated to comply. The calm but determined air of his antagonist told him that it was no jest, but that something terrible was intended. He glanced stealthily to the right and left, and seemed to calculate the chances of escape.

Robideau read his thoughts.

"Don't attempt it," said he, throwing back the lapel of his coat, and showing the butt of a pistol.

"I have this, and will use it, if you make any effort to get off. Come!"

Saying this, he seized the cowering ruffian by the wrist, and half leading, half dragging, hurried him away from the spot.

In five minutes after they stood under a tree—the same upon which Pierre Robideau had endured all the horror of hanging.

"What do you mean to do?" asked Brandon, in a faltering voice.

"I've told you. I'm curious to see how long you can stand it."

As he said this, he unloosed the bridle-reins from his body, and taking out his knife, commenced cutting them from the bit. It was a double-rein, composed of two long pieces of closely-plaited hair, taken from the tail of a horse.

Brandon stood pale and trembling. He could not fail to interpret the preparations that were being made. Once more he thought of flight; and once more Pierre read his thought.

"It is no use," he said, sternly. "You are in my power. Attempt to get out of it, or resist, and I dash your brains out against that tree. Now, your wrist can stand it."

Feeble with fear, Brandon allowed his left hand to be seized, and the wrist drawn into a noose made on one of the bridle-reins. The other end of the cord was passed around his thigh, and then brought back and secured by a firm knot, so as to hold the arm helpless by his side. This done, the other rein, with a running loop, was adjusted around his neck, and its loose end thrown over one of the higher branches.

"Now," cried Robideau, "mount upon the log, and take hold as you made me do. Quick, or I jerk you up by the neck!"

Bewildered, Brandon knew not what to do. Was his enemy in earnest?—or was it only a grim jest? He would fain have believed it this; but the fierce, determined look of Robideau forbade him to hope for mercy. He remembered at the moment how little he was deserving of it.

He was left no time to reflect. He felt the noose tightening around his neck, and the cord stretching taut above him.

In another instant he was drawn from the ground; and, mechanically throwing up his right arm, he caught hold of the branch to save himself from almost instant strangulation.

"Now," cried Robideau, who had sprung upon the log, and made the rope fast to the upper limb, "now, Mr. Alf Brandon, you're just as you left me six years ago. I hope you'll enjoy the situation. Good-day to you!"

And with a scornful laugh Pierre Robideau strode away from the spot!

All the agony that can be endured by man—who sees death before him and sees no chance to escape it, was at that hour endured by Alfred Brandon.

In vain he shouted until he was hoarse—till his cries could no longer be heard a hundred yards from

the tree so soon to become his gallows. There was no response, save the echo of his own voice. No one to hear or to heed it!

He had no expectation of being saved by the man who had just left him. That scornful laugh at parting precluded all hope; though in his anguished struggle he begged aloud for mercy, calling upon Pierre Robideau by name.

Pierre Robideau came not to his assistance; and after a long struggle—protracted to the utmost power of endurance—till the arm, half-disjointed, could no longer sustain his body, he let go his hold—and dropped—to the ground!

The peal of derisive laughter that rung in his ears as he lay unharmed upon the earth, was not pleasant—the less so that a female voice was heard taking part in it. But even this was endurable after the dread agony through which he had passed; and hurriedly springing to his feet, and releasing his neck from the rope, he sneaked off among the trees, without staying to cast a look at Pierre Robideau or Lena Rook, who, standing by the edge of the glade, had been witness to his unnecessary contortions!

Our tale is told, so far as it might interest the reader. What afterward happened to the different characters who have figured in it, were but events such as may occur in everyday life. There was nothing strange in a young man, with a taint of Indian blood in him, marrying the daughter of a backwoods settler, and carrying her off to California; nothing strange, either, that the father of the girl should sell off his "improvement," and make the far-western migration along with them.

And this was the history of Jerry Rook, his daughter, and his daughter's husband; all three of whom in less than twelve months after, might have been seen settled in their new home, on the far shores of the Pacific, and surrounded with every comfort required upon earth.

There Pierre Robideau had nothing further to fear from the hostility of early enemies, or the vengeance of jealous rivals; there Lena Rook, no longer exposed to social humiliation, had the opportunity of becoming that for which nature had intended her—an ornament to society; and there, too, her father found time to repent of the past; and prepare himself for that future which awaits alike the weary and the wicked.

Of his crimes, both committed and conceived, Jerry Rook died repentant.

The fate of Alfred Brandon was somewhat similar to that of his father. Drink brought him to a premature grave; though unlike his father he died without heir, and almost without heritage, having spent the whole of his property in the low dissipation of the tavern and the gambling-table. His executors found scarce sufficient to pay for the hearse that carried him to the grave.

With Bill Buck it was different. His funeral, which occurred shortly after, was at the public expense—his grave being dug near the foot of the gallows on which he had perished for many crimes committed against society—the last and greatest being a cold-blooded murder, with robbery for its motive.

Spencer, Slaughter, Randall, and Grubbs lived to take part in the late fratricidal war—all four, as might be expected, embracing the cause of secession, and all, it is believed, having perished in the strife, after the perpetration of many of those cruel atrocities in which the State of Arkansas was most conspicuously infamous.

Helena still stands on the banks of the mighty river, and there are many there who remember the tragedy of Dick Tarleton's death, but few, if any, who have ever heard the tale of "THE HELPLESS HAND."

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